

2009

## Perceptions of general educators regarding the inclusion of students with severe disabilities

Jasona Prowse  
*California State University, Monterey Bay*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps\\_thes](https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps_thes)

---

### Recommended Citation

Prowse, Jasona, "Perceptions of general educators regarding the inclusion of students with severe disabilities" (2009). *Capstone Projects and Master's Theses*. 449.  
[https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps\\_thes/449](https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps_thes/449)

This Master's Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Capstone Projects and Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. Unless otherwise indicated, this project was conducted as practicum not subject to IRB review but conducted in keeping with applicable regulatory guidance for training purposes. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csumb.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csumb.edu).

Perceptions of General Educators Regarding the Inclusion of  
Students with Severe Disabilities

By

Jasona Prowse

Action Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Masters of Arts in Education

College of Professional Studies

School of Education

California State University, Monterey Bay

Spring 2009

©2009 by Jasona C. Prowse. All rights reserved

ACTION THESIS SIGNATURE PAGE

PERCEPTIONS OF GENERAL EDUCATORS REGARDING THE INCLUSION OF  
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

BY

JASONA PROWSE

APPROVED BY THE GRADUATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

 \_\_\_\_\_ 5/6/09

DR. JOSH HARROWER  
GRADUATE ADVISOR

DATE

 \_\_\_\_\_ 5/1/09

DR. DOROTHY LOYD  
THESIS COMMITTEE MEMBER

DATE

### Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank Dr. Joshua Harrower, for his unlimited guidance and dedication to excellence and for encouraging me every step of the way towards achieving this accomplishment. Second, I would like to thank all the professors at California State University, Monterey Bay, for their dedication, support, and guidance: Dr. Irene Narez-Guzicki, Dr. Nicholas Meier, Dr. Lou Denti, and Dr. Dorothy Lloyd. I would like to thank my colleagues who volunteered their time and energy to participate in this study. I would also like to thank my parents, Linda Prowse-Fosler and Howard Fosler for their love and support of me throughout my life and especially, at this time, in my academic pursuits.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Table of Contents.....	4
Abstract.....	6
Chapter One: Statement of Purpose.....	7
The Goal and Purpose:.....	8
Research Question.....	10
Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	12
Review of the Literature.....	13
Conclusion.....	18
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	19
Participants.....	20
Procedure.....	21
Data Analysis.....	23
Chapter Four: Results.....	25
Effects on Typically Developing Peers.....	26
Effects of Having More Adults in the Classroom.....	29
Opportunity for Professional Development.....	31
Impact on Time Available for Teaching.....	36
Confidence in Ability to Successfully Include Students with Disabilities.....	39
The Support Staff.....	43

Support by the Administration..... 45

Additional Concerns ..... 46

Conclusion ..... 48

Chapter 5: Discussion ..... 50

References..... 54

Appendix A: Questionnaire ..... 57

Appendix B: Sample of Interview Questions ..... 59

### Abstract

This action research project examines the perceptions of 20 general education teachers at an elementary school that fully includes students with moderate to severe disabilities in general education classrooms. The study asked teachers to complete questionnaires and participate in small group and individual interviews regarding the topic of full inclusion. Teachers provided information regarding their thoughts on the benefits and limitations of fully including students with moderate to severe disabilities in their classrooms. Information was also provided regarding teacher insights into best practices for implementing a quality inclusion program.

## Chapter One: Statement of Purpose



## Statement of Purpose

### *The Goal and Purpose:*

This study investigated the opinions of 20 educators working in a full inclusion school in Monterey County, California, about their perceptions on the benefits and limitations of including students with moderate to severe disabilities in their classrooms. The school is unique in the Monterey Bay area for its participation in the inclusion of students with moderate to severe disabilities for nearly 12 years. Those individuals who began the program strongly believed that inclusion offered students with disabilities unparalleled benefits in the areas of socialization, community involvement, and work ethic, as well as academic benefits. Students who are fully included spend between 90-100 % of their day in general education environments with same-age peers. Included students participate as much as possible in the general education curriculum and classroom activities. The disability labels of the included students range from physical impairments to cognitive delay to emotional disturbance. Students may also have labels of hearing impaired, vision impaired, orthopedically handicapped, cognitive delay, autism, or other disabilities. This school is one of 4 known programs in the county that offer full inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities.

I have long held the notion that inclusion may offer substantial benefits to many students with disabilities. I chose to accept the position as inclusion case manager at this school because I believed inclusion could be extremely beneficial to students with disabilities and I suspected it could be helpful to students without disabilities as well. My experiences with inclusion began when I found myself assisting a 4<sup>th</sup> grade student with autism in mainstreaming, or participating

in a general education classroom, for 75% of his day. His immediate social and academic gains were immense, but not without my assistance and direct involvement. I worked hard to teach this student adaptive skills and I modified his curriculum to help him be successful. My hard work paid off when he graduated from having a one-to-one aid to total independence in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. When I began working with this student, he was being suspended numerous times per week for outrageous and inappropriate social behavior, including violence. Yet, he was able to use the numerous opportunities that an inclusive setting offered to gain skills that allowed him to be completely independent and successful within a couple of years, without a one-to-one instructional assistant.

I then taught a special day classroom for students with emotional disturbances. I tried to expose them as often as possible to the mainstream educational setting because I saw some of the benefits that inclusion offered. Being included appeared to improve students' behaviors when they were faced with the social expectations of typically developing peers. Students also strove to meet higher academic and social expectations while included. At the high school, my students more often completed their homework for their mainstream teachers than they did for me. Whether this was a comment on me or my classroom environment will always remain a mystery; but I hold the opinion that they felt the need to uphold the standard set by their peers, those who completed homework assignments. Students were often excited to participate in the general education classroom environment. They usually enjoyed themselves and it helped them learn more socially appropriate behaviors.

Because of my personal experiences with the success of including students with

disabilities and because of the unique position of inclusion case manager that I currently hold, I was interested in researching the opinions that general education teachers hold regarding the benefits and limitations of inclusion. I was also interested in how inclusion affects the general educators' teaching, classrooms, time, its effect on typically developing peers, and what general educators believed is needed to implement a successful program or improve the program.

It appeared to me that typically developing students enjoyed having students with disabilities in their classrooms. I often saw them trying to help, be a friend, a peer, and a classmate to included students. I saw much kindness and pride in the students who volunteered to be helpful to the included students with disabilities.

Lastly, I believe that there are limitations to inclusion as well. I have seen included students cause disruption to the classroom and learning environment. I have seen situations where inclusion appears to cause stress to the child with disabilities as well as the children without disabilities. And I have experienced the great amount of effort and work that is involved in providing a quality inclusion experience to all children. I am curious to research the opinions of the general education teachers who work so hard to manage a classroom and offer exceptional education to all students. What are their opinions of inclusion? Do they feel that it benefits students? Do they feel that it detracts from the other students? And what do they feel is necessary in order to offer inclusion to students so that all students have a fulfilling and successful educational experience?

### *Research Question*

What are the perceptions of general education teachers in inclusive classrooms regarding

the benefits and limitations of working in an inclusion setting? Secondly, what do these teachers feel is crucial to making inclusion a successful experience for all involved? Inclusion may provide unparalleled benefits to students with and without disabilities. It may also have some drawbacks. The participating general education teachers in this study were able to provide insightful information about the benefits and limitations of inclusion, as well as offer suggestions for implementing a successful inclusion program.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

## Review of the Literature

Inclusive education is a controversial topic in education (Havey, 1998). Current legislation encourages schools to ensure that students with disabilities participate in inclusive programs to the maximum extent (IDEA, 2004). Including students with disabilities in the general education classroom setting was determined to be a human rights issue in the 1994 UNESCO World Conference on Special Educational Needs (International League of Societies for Persons with Mental Handicap, 1994). Inclusive schooling means that everyone of every talent, ability, background, and culture deserves to be in a supportive mainstream school and classroom and to have their specific needs met (Stainback & Stainback, 1996).

The research regarding the benefits and disadvantages of inclusive education has been intensely debated (Harrower, 1999). According to Norwich (2008) the dilemma related to including students with severe disabilities is two-fold. On the one hand, children with severe disabilities needing special education who are taught in general classrooms have less access to specialized services and facilities. On the other hand, these students, if not taught in the general education setting, are more likely to feel excluded and not accepted by their peers. Some researchers claim that the social benefits to students with disabilities are many (Gibb, Tunbridge, Chua, and Frederickson, 2007). It has further been argued that children with disabilities are more likely to learn to appropriately engage in social interactions with peers and adults when taught in inclusive environments (Johnson & Johnson, 1987). Frederickson, Dunsmuir, Lang, and Monsen (2002) claim that students with disabilities who are included with non-disabled same-age peers have increased confidence and self-esteem. In a study of two inclusive classrooms Gibb,

Tunbridge, Chua, and Frederickson (2007) found that none of the 14 pupils with special needs included in their study were rejected by their classmates, according to interviews conducted with regular and special education staff members. Other research indicates that there may be increased anxiety, bullying of students with special needs, and negative feelings about mainstreaming by the child with special needs (Dyson, Farrell, Polat, & Hutchenson, 2004, Gibb, Tunbridge, Chua, & Frederickson, 2007).

Some of the documented advantages of inclusion identified thus far include the involvement and collaboration of mainstream and special education staff and teachers, co-teaching opportunities, new teaching techniques and adaptations, and the availability of focused instruction in mainstream classes (Baker & Zigmond, 1996). Additionally children with disabilities do not have to miss key participation times in their classes and can be fully integrated socially (Baker & Zigmond, 1996).

Researchers have argued that students without disabilities benefit too, as they are reported to have increased tolerance, acceptance, and understanding (York, Vandercook, MacDonald, Heise-Neff, & Caughey, 1991). They have also found that general education students reported wanting students with special needs to be included in their classrooms (York et al., 1991). Few negative learning achievement outcomes for the non-disabled peers participating in inclusive classrooms with students with severe disabilities have been reported in the literature (c.f. Harrower, 1999). Some studies report that “pull out” (educating students with disabilities in a separate classroom) strategies for educating students with disabilities have no benefit over learning in the integrated classroom (Hegarty, 1993; Madden & Slavin, 1983). On the other

hand, some studies have found slight increases in learning for the student with disabilities in the integrated setting (Manset & Semmel, 1997).

Teachers who were part of full inclusion programs have reported that there were many benefits to inclusion, such as increased peer learning, professional development, opportunities for innovation, and watching students with disabilities find enjoyment in participating in their class (Baker & Zigmond, 1996; Frederickson et. al., 2002; York et. al., 1991). One study found that teachers had a “yes-but” hierarchy of attitudes towards inclusion, preferring to include students with disabilities that did not have behavioral or emotional disabilities (Nutbrown & Clough, 2004). In a study of deaf and hard of hearing children (D/HH), researchers found that teachers of inclusive classrooms felt positive about the inclusion of D/HH children. D/HH children were coping with the academic demands, participating, communicating, and benefiting from inclusion. Interestingly, the D/HH students also had positive responses to inclusion, but less so than that of their teachers. Teachers felt the benefits were offered not only to the children with disabilities, but also to students without disabilities (Gibb et al. 2007; Kalambouka et. al., 2007; York et. al., 2007).

Some of the reported requirements for successfully operating an integrated classroom include adequate support and collaboration (Nevin et. al., 2007), and adequate resources of time, money, and materials (Frederickson et al., 2004). One of the most important factors reported by the teachers in Gibb et. al.’s (2007) study investigating the reintegration of 14 students with special needs into a general education classroom was collaboration with and availability of the “Inclusion Team” (inclusion specialist, instructional assistants, occupational therapists, speech



and language therapists, adaptive PE specialists), and especially the knowledge of the inclusion specialist. Logan (2006) found that instructional assistants were reported by teachers to be a welcome support in the classroom.

Some of the barriers to including students with special needs were reported by teachers to be coping with large classes, managing resources, time constraints, and concern about professional competency (Lambe & Bones, 2008; York et. al., 2007). Teachers of inclusive classrooms also reported the “how-to” aspect of including students with disabilities in their classroom routines, structure, and lessons to be challenging (Lambe & Bones, 2008; York et. al., 1991; York et. al., 2007). Some teachers reported that a main barrier to inclusion was inflexible attitudes among staff members (Gibb et. al., 2007).

Another potential barrier to the inclusion of students with severe disabilities might be a diminished self-perception and increased exposure to bullying, such as has been found in some studies on inclusion for students with mild to moderate disabilities (Norwich and Kelly, 2003 & 2004). Norwich and Kelly (2004) argue that students with learning disabilities had more positive self perceptions in special schools than in mainstream schools due to the presence of similar levels of learning difficulties among peers, and possibly more supportive instructional staff. Bullying is another issue researched by Norwich and Kelly (2003), who found that 86% of students with learning difficulties experienced some form of bullying, mostly from students in other mainstream schools and from peers and outsiders that may reside in their neighborhoods. They also found that 36% of the students in special schools with learning difficulties preferred to be in mainstream schools, while most students in a mainstream setting preferred “pull-out”

instructional support because it offered better quality, less noise, better work, more fun, less distracting, more attention, less bullying, and being with friends. Only one student with learning difficulties of the 101 sampled students reported preferring to be in a special school. While these results were found for students with mild learning disabilities, perhaps similar results may be found with students of moderate to severe disabilities.

On the other hand, Baker and Zigmond (1996) argue that students with learning disabilities in full inclusion programs did not benefit from individualized, focused, and well-planned instruction, and that there was little opportunity for students to work on and achieve IEP learning goals. They determined that a “pull out” program could offer better services.

In general, teachers support the idea of inclusion but question the practicality of actually implementing it (Nutbrown & Clough, 2004). Teachers in pre-service training have more positive attitudes towards inclusion before teaching in special classrooms than after, due to experience that mainstream settings are not adequately supportive or collaborative enough to provide quality service to students with disabilities (Lambe & Bones, 2008). However they continue to support the idea of inclusion, but merely feel that students would be poorly served. Attitudes and beliefs about inclusion tend to change with exposure to inclusion and successful experiences interacting with students with disabilities (Nevin, Cohen, Salazar, & Marshall, 2007). Teachers and administrators appear to recognize the dilemma involved in combining the dual goals of meeting students’ individual needs and creating a sense of belonging and acceptance for all students (Norwich, 2008).

Although teachers have reported supporting inclusion as an ideal (Nutbrown & Clough,

2004), Norwich (2008) found that most teachers tended to support separation more than inclusion. These teachers believed that separate instruction allowed greater access to specialized services for students with disabilities. This study is consistent with research identifying teacher competence and training to work with students with special needs to be an important variable in determining teachers' perceptions on inclusion (Lambe & Bones, 2007; York et. al., 2008).

### *Conclusion*

Given the conflicting perceptions of general educators towards the inclusion of students with disabilities, this study will seek to investigate the perceptions of educators currently including students in their general education classrooms. The study will focus on general educators' impressions on the benefits and limitations of including students with moderate to severe disabilities. Lastly, the study will seek out suggestions for improving the experience of inclusion for all involved.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

## Methodology

This research was conducted as a participant action research with use of a questionnaire and both formal and informal group and individual ethnographic interviews.

### *Participants*

The K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade elementary school where this study was conducted has operated an inclusion program for nearly 12 years. Inclusion at this school is full-time, meaning that students with severe disabilities are integrated into general education classrooms with same-age peers for 90-100% of their educational day. The general education teacher is responsible for the implementation of lesson plans in alignment with state standards and leading all classroom activities. They share in the responsibility to educate students with disabilities alongside the instructional aid and the inclusion specialist. Within the classroom, there is an instructional aide that supports the student or students with disabilities. They might offer one to one instruction, behavior management, and assistance in modifying instruction and curriculum. The inclusion specialist is expected to oversee the inclusion of all students, coordinate with support staff, modify the curriculum as needed, monitor academic progress, and offer consultation for classroom modifications, behavior challenges, and social interactions. Acting as the inclusion specialist, this investigator helps coordinate support staff, modify curriculum, consult around adaptations and classroom modifications, assist with behavior, and oversee all aspects of the inclusion program. Speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and adapted physical education services are offered inclusively or “pull-out” (e.g., outside of the general education class) depending on the needs of the student.

Twenty K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade general education teachers from one school located in the Monterey Bay area were selected for questioning and group and individual interviews. At this school, there were five teachers/classrooms for each grade level. Eighteen teachers filled out questionnaires. Nineteen teachers at the school participated in the group interviews. The one teacher who could not participate in the group interview volunteered for an individual interview. She was a 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher. Three additional individual interviews were conducted with 2 Kindergarten teachers and one 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher. These teachers were selected because of their active involvement in the inclusion of students with moderate to severe disabilities in their general education classrooms. Many of the teachers were veteran educators with experience in inclusive classrooms, while some teachers were new to the field. All teachers were female and fully credentialed by the California multiple subject certification to teach primary age children. Few teachers had formal training in the education of students with disabilities.

### *Procedure*

Initial data was gathered qualitatively through an open-ended anonymous questionnaire (see Appendix A) and followed by group and individual interviews (see Appendix B). Because of the investigator's role as the inclusion case manager, there was the possibility of withheld negative opinions on the part of the participating teachers. Therefore, open ended, anonymous questionnaires were offered for the initial gathering of data. An initial meeting with teachers during their weekly grade-level meetings provided the opportunity to explain the research project and request that teachers complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire was handed out at this time. The group interviews were also scheduled during this initial meeting. The questionnaires

were collected by the grade level chair teachers in an envelope at the next grade-level teacher meeting, in order to maintain anonymity. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire within one week of receiving it.

Since the questionnaire did not provide opportunities for in depth, probing questions and answers, follow-up questions were developed based upon the responses to the questionnaire to be presented in group interviews. The group interviews were conducted in grade level meetings separately with 4 to 5 teachers per grade level. One group interview per grade was conducted. Volunteers for individual interviews were requested and scheduled at this time.

The questionnaire (See Appendix A) was developed based on common themes identified in the review of the literature. Questions included but were not limited to the following: What are the positive or negative effects on typically developing peers? What are the disadvantages and advantages of extra support staff in the classroom (e.g., instructional aids, inclusion specialist)? Have teachers developed professionally as a result of inclusion? Does inclusion affect the amount of time available for teaching? How confident are teachers in their ability to include students with special needs? How helpful is the support staff? And lastly, what are teachers' general perceptions on inclusion? The questionnaire was intended to give an overview of teacher perceptions of full inclusion. Further questions regarding the specific benefits and disadvantages of instructional supports, effects of problem behavior on the classroom, availability and knowledge of support staff, time concerns, teacher training, and other questions were asked during the follow-up interviews.

Through the questionnaire and follow-up group and individual interviews, prevalent

themes were identified and pursued in-depth. These themes were coded, analyzed and are discussed in the results section.

### *Data Analysis*

The data consisted of completed questionnaires and group and individual interviews that were then transcribed. The questionnaires and transcribed interviews were then coded based on emerging themes. Proposed themes had been identified from the review of literature. The coding schemes were structured to focus on the benefits, limitations, and necessary components of inclusion.

From the research literature, some commonly identified benefits of inclusion were chosen for initial coding. These areas included but were not limited to: increased tolerance among same age peers, collaboration among professionals in both regular and special education, positive feelings about the increased support of the instructional assistants and inclusion specialist, and learning new teaching strategies as a result of the collaboration with special educators.

Some disadvantages were also noted in the literature and created the basis of coding schemes as well. These included but were not limited to 1) inadequate time for instruction, preparation and collaboration with staff, 2) inadequate training, support, and preparation to teach students with disabilities, 3) and difficulties with behavior problems in the classroom.

Another issue that was investigated dealt with what teachers felt were the essential components of including students with special needs. These included the availability of support and the knowledge or helpfulness of such support. Support staff included the instructional assistant, inclusion specialist, administration, and other specialists. Another essential component



was the availability of time for collaboration. And yet another issue was the need for training in order to build knowledge of strategies for instruction and for handling problem behavior.

These themes were analyzed for similarities and differences regarding teachers' perceptions about inclusion of students with moderate to severe disabilities. These questions and themes served as a guideline for data collection and analysis. The survey and interview questions were designed for open ended responses and allowed for additional themes to emerge that had not been identified from the literature review. These themes were identified as they arose, and coded accordingly.

## Chapter Four: Results

/

## Results

### *Effects on Typically Developing Peers*

A major theme that emerged as a result of this study related to the effects that the inclusion of students with moderate to severe disabilities had on typically developing peers. An overwhelming majority of teachers (17/18 who answered the questionnaire) reported that including students with disabilities had a positive effect on typically developing peers in their classes. Most teachers reported increased empathy, compassion, and tolerance among their students. Many teachers echoed each other saying that a positive was “to not be afraid of people with disabilities,” and that students “begin to accept differences in people”. A second grade teacher wrote that, “They learn that although some children may speak, act, or look different than themselves, all children have the same feelings inside (pride of doing something to the best of their ability, feeling sad, happy, enjoying a good laugh, enjoying friends, etc.).” Some teachers talked about the life skills that students can learn in a fully inclusive setting. A third grade teacher wrote, “Students, teachers, and the community develop empathy, compassion, and life skills to support all people.” Another 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher said,

And I think that’s a good thing for them. Cause [*sic*] a lot of our kids are very privileged and unless they have a cousin or a brother or a sister that has a disability. They really don’t have any interaction even with someone who’s troubled economically. I think it’s good for them to see. And when they get out into society, hopefully they will be kinder, gentler people and look on people with special disabilities a little different.

A few 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers (3) reported that they incorporated the modified curriculum that

the special education staff created for use with the students with disabilities to assist them in teaching the regular education students. They felt that the regular education students benefited from the increased visuals provided by the specialists working with the student(s) with disabilities. One 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher explained in a small group interview, “A lot of times, the stuff that your [inclusion] staff prepares for the special ed. kids works well for all of our kids. At this low of a grade level, all the visual stuff that they have, I use it a lot with the regular classroom.”

During a third grade small group interview, one teacher announced, “I think we need to let our students know about the students with disabilities. Let them know about the disability, like if they are in a wheel chair or in a walker, so they got to experience it like their peers...I mean they’re smart kids, they are empathetic.” A co-teacher agreed with her saying, “And it would also create that compassion and understanding when they are out in society.” This group of teachers expressed the idea that the general education population at the schools could be educated further about the disabilities of included peers.

Many teachers (10 out of 18 who answered the questionnaire) also reported some negative effects of having students with moderate to severe disabilities in their classrooms. They were especially concerned about disruptive behaviors that were aggressive, loud, or noisy. The teachers explained that disruptions in the classroom contributed to making it hard for peers to concentrate. For example, one teacher said,

There can be negative effects in a classroom if the inclusion child is extremely disruptive. If the classroom teacher has to devote a great deal of time to one student at the expense of the majority of the class, I feel this can have a negative effect. (This refers to inclusion

students as well as any gen. ed. student).

When further probed about the negative effects of including students with disabilities on typically developing peers, one 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher talked about an experience with an included child with autism who at times could be violent and scare her other students.

But also, it's hard to explain that [aggressive behaviors] to a parent [of a general education student] when a kid's coming home crying because they are scared. And they can't sleep and they are worried because such and such is going to scream in their face or knock the chairs down. When you're this little, it's a problem. I don't know if there's a good way except having them removed from the situation. Because if any students did that, we would have them removed from the situation. No one gets to stay in the class screaming or knocking chairs over or throwing themselves on the ground.

A smaller group of teachers (6 out of the 18 who completed the questionnaire) reported no negative effects on the typically developing peers in their class. One Kindergarten teacher reported that she had only good experiences with included students, but that she might be nervous about including a student with autism if that student had disruptive behaviors. She said, "So that's the only thing that I might be a little nervous about. I've talked to other teachers in other districts. And I've heard some real horror stories about autistic kids. And we've had some problems, but never the kinds of things that I've heard about in other schools."

Overall, nearly all teachers reported positive feelings about the effects of inclusion on typically developing peers, especially in building patience, tolerance, and compassion. However, a majority of teachers also mentioned that there were potential negative effects of including

students with moderate to severe disabilities on typically developing peers, particularly an increase in classroom disruptions.

### *Effects of Having More Adults in the Classroom*

Another major theme that emerged was related to the effects that may result from having more adults in the classroom to assist the included student with disabilities. Teachers reported both positive and negative effects from having additional staff in the classroom. They felt that additional staff could assist all students. They could work with small groups allowing the general education teacher to work more closely with all students. One kindergarten teacher said, "I have had very positive experiences with IA's [Instructional Assistants] in the classroom. They do much more than just help with the kid they're assigned to. They've run small groups, helped with behavior issues, and often the modified curriculum works for other students too."

Some teachers felt that additional staff members were available to help with clerical duties (e.g., copying, grading, preparing for lessons, etc.) and help other regular education students. A few teachers mentioned that the additional support helped reduce their stress. "If the I.A. is competent, it's wonderful because he or she can help in many ways - do folders, various clerical things, work with small groups, etc. [Kindergarten Teacher]." Some teachers also reported that additional staff helped to redirect problem behaviors. For example, one 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher stated:

The benefit is that the adults help out the entire class, not just the one they are assigned to, since they are working with interactions. Rarely have I found an adult that sequesters themselves with only their assigned student. Generally, the other adults help maintain

expected room behavior and offer quick reminders to any students displaying unexpected behavior.

A negative effect reported by the participants regarding additional staff in the classroom was the potential for the classroom environment to become too loud with adult conversations, and potentially distracting or disrupting the students.

It can be a disadvantage if the adults in the room are too loud and therefore distracting to others. It is important for IA's and inclusion specialists not to talk over the teacher, otherwise some students are unable to focus on the teacher's lesson and some students find it distracting [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher].

A small number of teachers (2 out of 18 who completed the questionnaire) reported that they did not feel there were any negatives to having additional adults in the classroom, only positives. For example, one 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher wrote, "It is always beneficial to me to have an extra set of hands in the classroom."

When asked in follow-up interviews if there were preferable ways for the additional staff to avoid disrupting and distracting the classroom, some of the teachers commented, "This isn't social time and they [the aide] should be very aware and speak very quietly [Kindergarten Teacher] ." Other teachers provided the following information:

It's really distracting to try and teach 20 students and one of them is in the back of the room getting a different lesson, then they should leave. If they are doing different things, then that inclusion experience is over. To be included means they are doing the same thing [3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Teacher].

I think just letting people know the subtle nuances of different teachers having different styles and you need to be really aware of what are their expectations. When is a good time to talk to the students and when isn't. It's not always black or white and it differs. Sometimes I want everyone to be quiet. And it's important that my inclusion students learn to listen to my voice and I don't want the aide to help out [1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher].

One teacher gave the example of when she had two inclusion students who each had high levels of need along with numerous support staff in her classroom:

Well, I think a lot of that has been worked out. It was a situation to have two inclusion kids, and have two teachers for each of those. Right away I had three adults everyday. Then I had my own volunteers. Then these two both had special needs of a speech therapist, or a physical therapist, or an occupational therapist who was also in the room, because they wanted to be in the room instead of taking them out. So I had 4 adults in that room with me. Now, it doesn't matter who the 4 adults are, even if everyone is whispering, your noise level increases. Now I don't think that would happen again if everyone thought it through [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher].

Most of the interviewed teachers felt that having additional staff in the room was positive because it provided more attention and help for all the kids. However it also had its drawbacks, such as if too many staff were in the room, if separate instruction was occurring during important lecture time, or if there were side conversations between adults with the potential to distract others.

*Opportunity for Professional Development*



The level of and need for professional development was another relevant theme that arose. All teachers claimed that they had developed professionally from the experience of including kids with special needs in their classroom. They felt that they had learned how to teach kids with special needs, that they had improved their skills at differentiating instruction, and that they had learned teaching strategies from co-workers and specialists. They also reported learning increased patience and compassion (especially for children with autism). The following quotes illustrate these ideas:

I've learned to differentiate my lessons more effectively. I tried different behavior modification plans [1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher].

Learning more about all types of children is positive. Having an inclusion child in my class makes me think more carefully about my lessons, which is a good thing [Kindergarten Teacher].

It has helped me develop as a supervisor and co-teacher. I learned how to develop a close working relationship with an aide. And I learned how to teach a special needs student [3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Teacher].

There is no doubt that I have grown professionally from my experiences with students with disabilities in my classroom. I have more compassion for all students, knowing each individual can have an area in which they may struggle due to something beyond their control. I have learned that everyday occurrences that I might not think anything of, can be overwhelming to another (noise, sensory input, over stimulated classroom, etc.). I have a great appreciation to the world in which autistic children live in. I am more

sensitive to the needs of parents who have a child with disabilities and realize how overwhelming it can be at times [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher].

Teachers reported that they had developed professionally, and in many areas personally, through working with students with disabilities. They felt that they learned more teaching strategies, had increased opportunities to collaborate with co-workers, and gained more tolerance and patience. As one 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher said, “I try to be more tolerant of students with disabilities and give them ‘wait-time’. On the other hand, students with disabilities see their world differently and have insights the rest of us take for granted.”

To see if any formal training opportunities had been made available to these teachers, the question, “Have you received any training on inclusion or teaching students with disabilities?” was posed during follow-up interviews. An overwhelming majority of teachers reported during the interviews that they had not received adequate professional training on how to include students with disabilities in their classrooms. Unanimously, teachers expressed a desire for more training, especially focused on behavior management and teaching students based on specific disability categories.

We haven’t had any workshops or staff development. We’ve just had parents come in and talk, about Asperger’s [Syndrome]. But nothing about Down’s [Syndrome] or whatever... [3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Teacher].

Minimal [training]. Like the training that you [the inclusion specialist] did at the beginning of the year. We’ve probably had something like that over the years [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher].

We've had awareness training, but we've never had the how to teach [students with disabilities]. I mean we do; we've had trainings on how to teach reading, how to teach math, how you teach [in general]. And there are literally times when we've had students where we don't know what their issues are. They haven't told us what their issue is. And we're like, "Ok, we'll do what we can!" [Second Grade Teacher].

Some teachers talked about having some training in their teacher credentialing program (2). For example, one 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher said, "I had to take a class on inclusion for my credentialing program. We got a lot of it in there." Many teachers felt that most of their training was done on the job. "It's all on the job training," stated a kindergarten teacher, when asked about her level of training. Some teachers talked about seeking out additional trainings when they had especially challenging students placed in their classes. For example, a 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher who reported having had a tough year including a child with autism said, "I went to an autism workshop the few years that I had a student with autism because I needed more help in figuring out what the heck he was thinking!"

Almost all teachers expressed wanting more training on how to work with students with disabilities, but training specific to the needs of their included student. "Training needs to be personalized and come before the child arrives," said a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher. A conversation between three 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers, when asked the question, "How can the inclusion program be improved?" nicely summarizes this idea:

Teacher 1: I think maybe more training for the teacher. As a teacher, we don't receive any training. There is nothing in special ed.. We might have a class [in a credential

program], or part of a class, part of a semester of learning processes, might concern special ed....and so I think providing literature to the teacher, providing extra funding for specialists to come visit and teach us. Even this year, we had one professional growth afternoon about it when you [the inclusion specialist] did that [referring to a disability awareness training] and that was great. But if that's the extent of it, then we are really in trouble.

Teacher 2: I would say that's it, more training. The aides are great.

Teacher 3: Just what's provided to the teachers. And maybe that specific year, maybe the aide and the teacher can go to a conference together and they can learn how to better help that student together.

Teacher 1: Relevant literature and time to talk about it and learn about it.

Teacher 3: I don't have time to read, but I will go to a conference.

Teacher 1: Give her an audiotape or a video.

Teacher 2: Give information in the teacher's learning style please.

When asked what kinds of trainings they would like to have, most teachers responded like this 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher: "I'd like some more management ideas, especially with behaviors. I've had some rough years. This is a great year: a dreamy class. But I'm getting spoiled." Or like this kindergarten teacher said, "Just specific things about disabilities."

In summary, the participants all felt that they had developed professionally through the experience of including students with disabilities. They also felt that additional training would be helpful and that they had received little to no training on how to effectively include students with

disabilities in their classrooms. Most participants wanted additional training on specific disabilities and behavior management techniques. Some teachers wanted additional teaching strategies.

### *Impact on Time Available for Teaching*

Time was an important theme among participating teachers. Participants had mixed responses to the question of “How has inclusion impacted the amount of time available to you for teaching? How has it had a positive or negative impact on your time?” Some teachers felt that including students took additional time, mostly due to the requirement for extra planning and collaboration with staff (6 out of 18 teachers responding to the questionnaire). Some comments illustrating this theme include the following: “I spend more time planning for the inclusion student [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher]”. “I need more time to work with the inclusion specialist in my role with each student’s IEP goals [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher]”. “Inclusion means more meetings. Otherwise, there is not usually a negative impact. The IA’s may free me to have more time to teach [Kinder Teacher]”. One 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher talked about the specific delineation between preparation time and teaching time:

The county assigns an aide to manage students with needs (curriculum and behavior management); therefore I can efficiently use teaching time. I find it has not had a significant impact on teaching time. As for overall time, it is an additional task to organize lesson plans and curriculum to give to the county aide so they can modify/adapt their curriculum for the students with special needs.

An equal number of teachers felt that inclusion had no impact on their teaching time (6 out of 18

teachers). For example, a 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher commented, “I do not think inclusion has impacted the amount of time for teaching.”

Other teachers expressed that the amount of time spent on inclusion depended on the child being included and what their needs were (4 out of 18). For example, one 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher commented,

The amount of time available for teaching when I have had inclusion students has varied depending on the student(s), the aide, and the inclusion specialist. It had a negative impact when I had daily meetings, parents making unreasonable demands, three inclusion students, two inclusion teachers, weekly observations of therapists and/or other specialists. (These conditions were not all in one year).

A few teachers felt that having the support of an aide gave them more time to teach and prepare materials for their class (2 out of 18).

The inclusion program has had a positive impact on my time when I had teachers and/or aides who assisted with other students, helped with prep work, generally giving an extra hand where needed [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher].

To further probe this issue, these follow-up questions were asked in the interviews: “How much time per day do you feel is devoted to working with the students with disabilities?” and “What do you feel would be sufficient time to collaborate with the inclusion staff? Say a per week estimate?” Many teachers said that they needed a minimum of 30 minutes per day: “I’d say 30 minutes to an hour just focusing on that student [Kindergarten Teacher].” The majority of respondents said that they needed time to meet with the inclusion team, especially the aide, and

that they never got the time they needed.

I never have that time! ‘And by the way, tomorrow we’re doing this, so bring whatever’ [example of what would be said to an aide during the school day in preparation for an activity]. I never have had any time to talk that I could remember...Part of my problem is that we don’t even have time for us [Kindergarten team] to talk [Kindergarten Teacher].

Some teachers reiterated that they felt the amount of time they needed depended on the needs of the child and on the quality of the aide. Here, two teachers talk about their experience:

Depends on the inclusion child...in an hour, I might spend 30 of those minutes with just that student and other years, I don’t spend any time. If they have a really good aide, I might just glance at their work [1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher].

It depends on the project too. If the assistant has to go have lunch, I sit down with the student and help them work on their project. Sometimes 15 minutes of just sitting there with the child if the other children are working well on their own. But I walk around and work with them just like I work with any of the other children [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher].

Some teachers talked about making additional time for collaboration and reducing other responsibilities to compensate for the extra time it took to work with and collaborate around an inclusion child. An example of this is exemplified in the following quote:

Let’s say you have two inclusion kids. That’s going to need more time as a team. I think other considerations need to be taken care of that maybe that teacher doesn’t have to go to a staff meeting on Wednesday and that’s the chance to meet. Again it’s that fine line. I

think we all embrace the program, but you don't want to be putting more time adding stress on a teacher, and it becomes stressful if you're trying to do your own IEP's, your own staff meetings, your grade level meetings, and then you have two inclusion meetings [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher].

Another teacher suggested limiting yard duty for teachers of inclusion students:

Maybe there's one less yard duty. They meet at recess. I think there could be some out of the box thinking, making it so every teacher embraces it instead of regrets it [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher].

Teachers had mixed responses regarding the amount of additional time that including students with moderate to severe disabilities took from their work day. However, most teachers felt that there was not a significant increase in the amount of teaching time devoted to the inclusion child, as long as there was an inclusion aide with them. Some teachers, though, did comment on the increased collaboration and planning time. Among the teachers questioned, a few felt that they had more time as a result of having an aide in the classroom. Furthermore, many teachers felt that the time required of them was dependent on the child's level of need.

#### *Confidence in Ability to Successfully Include Students with Disabilities*

Another emerging theme deals with the level of confidence that a teacher feels in their ability to include students with moderate to severe disabilities. Though not a majority, the most common response was that teachers were very confident in their ability to include students with special needs (8 out of 18 teachers responding to the questionnaire). These teachers made comments like, "I have had many students over the years and feel confident including them



[Kindergarten Teacher].”

Other teachers felt confident, if they were well supported by an aide or inclusion specialist (3 out of 18). For example, one 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher said, “As long as there is a good support system in place with an aide or inclusion specialist, I feel I can successfully include a student with a disability”.

A couple of teachers felt only “fairly confident”, while a few teachers did not feel confident at all (3 out of 18). One 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher said that she was, “Not so confident. I feel better when there’s someone who can help with ideas for differentiation.” One teacher mentioned that they did not feel confident if the child had disruptive behaviors. She said she felt, “Pretty confident unless the student is disruptive [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher].”

To further probe the issue, teachers were asked about some of their most effective teaching strategies to incorporate while teaching students with disabilities. Teachers generally felt that the basic teaching strategies worked for all kids, both with and without disabilities. “Good teaching strategies work for regular ed. or special ed.,” said a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher.

The following are various comments made by 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teachers in response to the question, “What have been some of the best strategies you’ve learned on how to teach students with special needs?”

It’s just knowing which strategies to use. Like speaking very quietly. I’m thinking of autism again. But that is something I do with all the kids. But that is a strategy I would specifically use with an autistic child. So I think it’s pulling those ones that are going to work for the situation at hand.

And we don't want to teach the children as if they are different. That's the whole idea is that they are included.

But again, it's teaching practice to be more aware of the visual, auditory, kinesthetic lesson. But then again, you need to go through that and hit it all for your kids anyway, but it specifically comes to mind when I've had inclusion kids.

The 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers had similar opinions as the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teachers. They talked about how basic teaching strategies worked best, but also added some additional strategies such as peer tutoring. One 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher announced that, "I found peer tutoring works really well. And the kids really like to help out." Some teachers appreciated the additional curriculum that the inclusion staff prepared for their inclusion students. One teacher said, "A lot of times, the stuff that your staff prepares for the special ed. kids works well for all of our kids. At this low of grade level, all the visual stuff that they have, I use it a lot with the regular classroom."

Ignoring disruptive behavior was one strategy mentioned as well. A 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher spoke about strategic ignoring in the following quote:

One thing that I was trained and taught to do was definitely to ignore any outbursts. And when he [included student] would run to the window looking for the bus and wanting to leave, [we would] just ignore that and go along with our day and keep following the lesson plans however they were.

The Kindergarten teachers shared that they felt that using multiple modalities was key to working with all kids, not just inclusion kids; that good teaching strategies also helped the inclusion kids participate in the classroom.

A lot of what we do automatically in kindergarten is good for every child because we use all modalities, we demonstrate what we explain in words and that's an automatic kindergarten thing and I think that's what everybody needs. That's what kindergarten is all about; explaining in many ways and demonstrating in many ways.

In discussing the issue of teacher confidence, an important aspect of the teacher's role in working with included students with moderate to severe disabilities emerged. One teacher felt that in the past, the delineation of the various professionals' roles had been nebulous. She says,

I think the person in charge needs to be really clear on the aide's role, as well as the teacher's role. And where are they together and where do they have their own? The program gets better and better when all those pieces are in place [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher].

Other teachers seemed to express more confidence in their understanding of their roles. Mostly teachers felt that they had a more social role in the included student's experience. One teacher said she thought her role was "To make them feel a part and accepted in the classroom [Kindergarten Teacher]." Another teacher felt that it was her role to help the child experience being in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. She says her role is,

Providing them with the opportunity to be in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, doing 1<sup>st</sup> grade things, doing 1<sup>st</sup> grade social things, learning to problem solve, 1<sup>st</sup> grade style, and then figuring out how, coordinating with their instructional aide, how to help them with the academics. You know, this is what we are doing; how can we make it so it's something worthwhile for them? That's what I see myself as [1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher].

Teachers reported having multiple levels of confidence around including students with

special needs. It also appeared that the behaviors displayed by the students they included functioned as a relevant factor influencing the teachers' confidence levels. As was explained earlier, it was important to the staff to have appropriate training on how to include students with special needs.

### *The Support Staff*

A key issue that arose frequently, not only in the research literature but also in this study's participant responses, was that of the level and quality of the support staff. Overwhelmingly, teachers responded with a "very" helpful response (12 out of 18 respondents to the questionnaire). They made comments like, "Wonderful! [1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher]", "Support staff is awesome! [1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher]", and "Generally, very helpful [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher]". Of these responses, two teachers wrote that the program was completely dependent on the support staff: "The support staff is crucial! I feel it would not be successful without a county aide, inclusion director, supportive parents, and a community which values the program, and its outcomes [3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Teacher]."

Some teachers said that the level of support varied depending on the staff (4 out of the 18 respondents). "Like all teachers, there have been exceptional individuals and there have been those who seem to need their own support staff [Kindergarten Teacher]." Only one teacher said that they felt the support was only "fair" in its level of helpfulness.

To further probe this issue, additional questions were asked during the interviews: "What are some of the qualities, characteristics or actions that define an exceptional aide?" Listed are some of the responses:

Working with the child, [and the IA's] ability to read the class. Knowing when a child who is not the inclusion child needs help and going over to help them [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher].

Working as a team [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher].

It was great. I enjoyed it because there was another person to see all the kids. And you know if there was something funny that you didn't have time to process, but if you talked about it together, you could think, yeah, that it was a little odd, and I wonder what's going on. Is there stuff at home or academics, or usually they're connected. More brainpower to observe and chat. I really appreciated it [1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher].

Some teachers, when asked if they had suggestions for how to improve the quality of the instructional aides responded with concerns about the support staff. The following quotes illustrate some of these concerns:

We've also had some, who are very hard workers and I'm not being critical, who even their grammar is not accurate grammar, so when they talk to the other kids and try to instruct something, they don't always have the knowledge of how to do it. Sometimes they are not as educated as they should be on how to interact just themselves. I don't mean to be critical because they work hard and I understand that [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher].

And sometimes they do too much for the kids too. They'll draw the picture and do everything. It's beautiful, but it's not anything that the child has participated in [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher].

I had an aide this year who would come to me each time and say, "Oh, she [the student]

did this. What do I do?” And I would have to put my class on hold and say “Ok, what exactly did she do? Oh right, take her up to the office or go back and talk to her about it. Ok, what were we doing? Oh yes, right...” and I have to apologize to the rest of the class. I would have to let her know that she was great and feel free, that whatever she feels was best; if you feel she needs a time out; if you feel she needs a talking to; she needs to go for a walk or go to the office. Please, I need you to do that for me. It’s part of the job. Having that authority to go ahead and say, I know you’re busy, I’m going to go ahead and handle this myself. And it’s ok to do that [2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher].

Overall, however, the support staff was viewed as being helpful and crucial to the successful inclusion of students with disabilities.

#### *Support by the Administration*

Overwhelmingly, the participating teachers in the study felt supported by their administration (e.g., the principal and education directors), especially in the current year. As one teacher put it, “Each year is different. This year, I feel supported by the administration [2<sup>nd</sup> grade Teacher].” Another teacher commented that the current administration was the most supportive she had experienced. “This school has an amazing administration especially when it comes to special education. In my other 3 schools over a period of 10 years, I have not seen it’s equal [1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher].”

When discussing administrative support, a couple of teachers commented that they felt that the rights of the individual inclusion students superseded the rights of the general education students: “There have been a few times when I felt the individual inclusion students’ rights

intruded on the general ed. students' rights [Kindergarten Teacher].” This was an interesting take on the contribution of the administration in support of the inclusion program.

### *Additional Concerns*

Teachers' concerns have been addressed in a number of the themes discussed previously, such as with regards to students who are disruptive to the classroom, insufficient collaboration time, quality of the instructional aides, lack of training, etc. While these were some of the top concerns expressed by the teachers, some teachers offered information about additional issues that concerned them. In responses to the question, “What are your top concerns?”, many participating teachers expressed that the possibility that students were not in the right educational placement for the right amount of time, and thus might not be getting their needs met, was a concern. These students, the teachers felt, might benefit from a different placement or a reduced amount of included time. One 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher said, “I sometimes feel that the included student does not always get the specialized curriculum that they need. Those with severe disabilities, I think, would benefit from a push in program and then individualized academic and social instruction.” Another teacher echoed her concern saying,

I have had some concerns over the years that some students with disabilities are in the general ed. classroom for too long a period, often to appease the parents. I have had some children that I have been concerned that they are not getting enough physical or occupational therapy and are placed in classrooms “to look like other students their age”. I feel some students with more severe disabilities would be better served with more time learning life skills and the time in the general ed. room should be more about social

interactions [Second Grade Teacher].

Additionally, three 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers were concerned about the amount of time that the aides had to prepare materials and modify curriculum. One teacher said, “A top concern for an inclusion program is a student’s success academically and socially, but also aids [*sic*] having time to properly implement goals and curriculum. We all need prep time, but inclusion aids [*sic*] don’t seem to get any or much [3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Teacher].”

When further probed on this issue, another 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade teacher thought that the quality of the curriculum was one of the most important factors of a successful program. She said,

The main difference that I saw when it [inclusion] works and when it doesn’t work was that the I.A. was really good about taking our curriculum and adapting it to what the student’s needs were. One I.A. wasn’t as well trained in that. So it was harder on me to have to try to adapt the materials for [a student]. [Student 1] was definitely a higher level than [Student 2]. So there was more adapting that needed to be done. But that to me, the manager is to make sure that the curriculum being presented to the inclusion student is at their level and is appropriate and is being adapted. That way, it’s much easier on all three pieces: the students getting the appropriate work, the aide has the appropriate work for the students so they are not getting frustrated trying to teach something that is too high. And the teacher can address the regular ed. students cause [*sic*] they know that the inclusion student is also working on the same concepts but on their level.

In general, teachers had three common additional concerns: 1) the appropriateness of the placement, 2) the quality of the support staff, and 3) the quality and availability of appropriate



curriculum.

### *Conclusion*

Teachers reported that overall, they felt that the experience of inclusion was very beneficial to students with disabilities as well as to the typically developing students. Inclusion increased empathy, compassion, and tolerance of peers who are different. Inclusion had the perceived benefit of helping students with disabilities learn social skills and to build friendships. The additional staff also proved helpful to the classroom teacher and to typically developing peers. Teachers reported that they had developed professionally as a result of inclusion. As one teacher expressed, “It is truly a rewarding experience to have an inclusion student be a part of your classroom.”

Conversely, teachers also reported on the disadvantages of inclusion. If a student was disruptive or aggressive, teachers reported that inclusion might have a negative impact on typically developing peers. Teachers also expressed concern about the appropriateness of an inclusion placement for some students who were being taught using a different curriculum, and thus might not have access to a sufficient level of special education services. Teachers reported that there were some challenges to including students with moderate to severe disabilities. These included the potential for additional staff to cause some distraction to typically developing peers, a lack of training in how to teach students with disabilities, and inadequate collaboration time.

Participants were also able to identify necessary components to an effective inclusion experience. These included having the necessary support, (e.g., inclusion specialist, instructional aides, and other related services), having proper training and information, sufficient collaboration

time, effective behavior management of the inclusion student, and having access to pre-made curricular modifications/adaptations.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

## Discussion

The participants in this study identified some very important issues regarding the full inclusion of students with moderate to severe disabilities. The overall benefits of inclusion identified were 1) increased empathy, tolerance, and compassion that general education students gain, 2) increased socialization and the opportunity to belong to a class for the students with disabilities, 3) increased staff support, and 4) the informal opportunity for teacher professional development. Additionally, some disadvantages were presented. These included 1) disruptive behaviors by the student with disabilities, 2) inappropriateness of the placement, 3) distracting support staff lack of formal training, and 4) inadequate collaboration time.

Teachers felt that there were a number of key components to providing a quality inclusion experience. These included an adequate number of quality, well-trained support staff, proper training for the teachers, adequate collaboration time for teachers to work with the support staff, availability of support for effective behavior management of included students, and appropriate pre-made, modified curriculum.

This study was limited in its breadth by the fact that only one school implementing inclusion was studied. Thus the results reflect the perceptions of just the teachers at this particular school, participating in this school's implementation of full inclusion. Additionally, the investigator was a co-worker of the teachers who participated, and served as the inclusion specialist. Therefore the teachers may have expressed a more optimistic perception of inclusion. The study was a qualitative study designed to analyze teacher perceptions. It did not include the collection of quantitative data on the extent to which best practice strategies for inclusion at this

school site were actually being implemented. It is possible that teacher perceptions may vary depending on the quality of the inclusion program itself. However, in this study, teacher responses were focused on their particular inclusion program and its particular students and staff. While the relationship between the teachers' perceptions and the quality of the inclusion program may not be known, the purpose of this action research was to analyze the perceptions of general education teachers at an individual school in order to allow the investigator to gain insight into how to best support the inclusion program.

Based on the results of this study, a number of findings will be useful in improving the program. It is possible that this information may also be used to help other inclusion programs. From the results of this study, it appears that one area of need is better behavior management of included students. This might best be addressed by providing additional training or coaching on the part of the inclusion specialist to the general education teachers on effective behavior support strategies in the inclusive classroom? Another area identified might be more collaboration time between the general education teacher and inclusion team. A couple of teachers suggested trading scheduled yard duties for regular meeting times with the inclusion team to balance out the additional time the meetings would take from their teaching schedule. In addition, the inclusion case manager plans to attend all staff and grade-level meetings to gather information on upcoming events and better prepare curriculum and activities to meet the needs of the students with disabilities.

Sensitivity to the classroom environment on the part of the support staff appears to be an important issue. This can be addressed through the development of materials, training and

supervision of the support staff outlining appropriate conduct (e.g., voice level, when to provide 1:1 instruction to included students, improved behavior management, and when and how to coordinate with or ask questions of the teacher to avoid disruption, etc.) when supporting students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Continued training on disabilities is another area of need, which could be addressed through the revision of an existing awareness training provided to the general education teachers by the inclusion specialist. For example, the inclusion specialist could work with the general education teachers to identify the disability labels of the students who will be participating in their classes prior to the start of the school year, and revise the training to focus on the characteristics and best practice strategies for students with these specific disabilities? Lastly, the current availability of appropriate, adapted curriculum may also be in need of improvement. Therefore, a greater effort to plan for individualized instruction, to modify and adapt curriculum, and to seek additional training on curricular adaptations will be made.

In sum, the general education teachers provided a rich and nuanced perspective on the important topic of full inclusion. Numerous benefits of full inclusion were noted, while potential barriers to the successful implementation of the inclusion program were also pointed out. As a result, in my role as the inclusion specialist, I have been provided with an understanding that will likely lead to many improvements in the quality of support that I provide to these teachers, thus positively impacting the overall implementation of the full inclusion program at this school.

## References

- Avramidis, E. & Kalyva, E. (2007). The influence of teaching experience and professional development on Greek teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 22(4), 367-389.
- Baker, J. & Zigmond, N. (1995). The Meaning and Practice of Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities: Themes and Implications for the Five Cases. *Journal of Special Education*, 29(2), 163-181.
- Frederickson, N., Dunsmuir, S., Lang, J., & Monsen, J. (2004). Mainstream-special school inclusion partnerships: pupil, parent and teacher perspectives. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 8(1), 37-57.
- Gibb, K., Tunbridge, D., Chua, A., & Frederickson, N. (2007). Pathways to Inclusion: Moving from special school to mainstream. *Association of Educational Psychology in Practice*, 23(2), 109-127.
- Hadjikakou, K., Petridou, L., & Stylianou, C. (2008). The academic and social inclusion of oral deaf and hard-of-hearing children in Cyprus secondary general education: investigating the perspectives of the stakeholders. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 23(1), 17-29.
- Hallahan, D. (1998). Sound Bytes from Special Education Reform Rhetoric. *Remedial & Special Education*, 19(2), 67-70.
- Harrower, J. (1999). Educational Inclusion of Children with Severe Disabilities. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 1(4), 215-230.

- Havey, J. M. (1998). Inclusion, the Law, and Placement Decisions: Implications for School Psychologists. *Psychology in the School*, 35(2), 145-152.
- Kalambouka, A., Farrell, P., Dyson, A., & Kaplan, I. (2007). The impact of placing pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools on the achievement of their peers. *Educational Research*, 49(4), 365-382.
- Kelly, N. & Norwich, B. (2004). Pupils' perceptions of self and of labels: Moderate learning difficulties in mainstream and special schools. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 74, 411-435.
- Lambe, J., & Bones, R. (2008). The impact of a special school placement on student teachers' beliefs about inclusive education in Northern Ireland. *British Journal of Special Education*, 35(2), 108-116.
- Logan, A. (2006). The role of the special needs assistant supporting pupils with special educational needs in Irish mainstream primary schools. *Support for Learning*, 21(2), 92-99.
- Manset, G & Semmel, M. (1997). Are inclusive programs for students with mild disabilities effective? A comparative review of model programs. *Journal of Special Education*, 31(2), 155-181.
- Nevil, A., Cohen, J., Salazar, L., & Marshall, D. (2007). Student Teacher Perspectives on Inclusion Education. *Paper Presented at the Annual Conference of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education*, New York, NY.
- Norwich, B. (2008). What future for special schools and inclusion? Conceptual and professional



- perspectives. *British Journal of Special Education*, 35(3), 136-143.
- Nutbrown, C. & Clough, P. (2004) Inclusion and exclusion in the early years: conversation with European educators. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 19(3), 301-315.
- Richards, S., Hunley, S., Weaver, R., & Landers, M. (2003). A Proposed Model for Teaching Collaboration Skills to General and Special Education Preservice Candidates. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 26(3), 246-250.
- Vaughn, S. & Klingner, J. (1998). Students' Perceptions of Inclusion and Resources Room Settings. *The Journal of Special Education*, 32(2), 79-88.
- Wedell, K. (2008). Confusion about inclusion: patching up or system change. *British Journal of Special Education*, 35(3), 127-135.
- York, J., Vandercook, T., MacDonald, C., Heise-Neff, C., & Caughey, E. (1991) Feedback about integrating middle school students with severe disabilities in general education classes. *Exceptional Children* 58(3), 244-259.
- Zigmond, N. & Baker, J. (1996). Full Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities: Too Much of a Good Thing? *Theory Into Practice*, 35(1), 26-33.

Appendix A

*Questionnaire*

This questionnaire is on the topic of inclusion of students with moderate/severe disabilities into general education classrooms. This questionnaire is intended to explore the general education teachers' perceptions on inclusion. The responses are anonymous so honesty is encouraged.

1. What are some positive or negative effects on typically developing peers?

---

---

2. What are some benefits or disadvantages to having more adults (i.e. instructional aid and inclusion specialist) in the classroom?

---

---

---

3. Have you been able to develop professionally from the experience of having students with disabilities in your classroom? If so, how? If not, why not?

---

---

---

4. How has inclusion impacted the amount of time available to you for teaching? How has it had a positive or negative impact on your time?

---

---

5. How confident do you feel in your ability to successfully include a student with a disability?

---

---

6. Overall, how helpful is the support staff?

---

---

7. Do you feel supported by administration?

---

---

8. What are your general impressions regarding inclusion?

---

---

---

9. What are your top concerns?

---

---

---

10. What do you like best about inclusion?

---

---

Feel free to write additional comments on this page.

## Appendix B

*Sample of Interview Questions*

How much time per day do you feel is devoted to working with the students with disabilities?

As compared to typically-developing students?

In your experience, which students with disabilities have you seen benefit the most from inclusion?

Have you received any training on inclusion or teaching students with disabilities? If so, what?

What have been the best strategies you have learned to teach students with special needs?

Have there been any specific strategies learned through working with students with disabilities that you have been able to implement in your classroom that has helped gen. ed. students?

What do you feel is your role in working with students with special needs?

What do you feel would be sufficient time to collaborate with the inclusion staff? Say a per week estimate?

Do you think it would be a good idea to have the inclusion specialist attend grade level meeting and be available for collaboration and modifications around lesson plans.

Some of you mentioned that having more than one adult in the classroom caused some disruption or distraction to students and your teaching. What are preferable ways for the inclusion staff to communicate with each other and with you that avoids being distracting for students or disruptive to classroom routine?

Many of you talked about the positive social effect that inclusion had on both typically developing and disabled students. Can you give an anecdotal story about a time when you saw a student with or without disabilities show use of a specific learned social skill?

What are some specific examples of gained tolerance that you have seen? How has this affected your students in the long run? Have you seen major changes in your student's attitude as a result of having a student with disabilities in your class?

In my research, I have found it to be common for teachers to note that students with disruptive or aggressive behaviors are difficult to include in gen. education classrooms. What are some strategies that you have implemented to reduce the negative impact that disruptive students have on the learning of all students in the class? Do you feel that the support staff mitigates the effects of disruptive or aggressive students on the classroom effectively? What would help reduce the negative impact?

What specific tasks do you find asking the aide to help you with?

What characteristics, qualities or actions do you see defining an exceptional aide? What have been specific examples of problems with aides that you have seen?

In what ways can the inclusion specialist help support you better, say behavior management, trainings, modifications to curriculum, differentiation, etc.? What would you expect from an inclusion specialist?

What are some areas that would make the experience of inclusion better for you?

Better for your students?