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Inclusion: a view from students and teachers

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INCLUSION: A VIEW FROM STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

by
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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study is to examine students' and teachers' opinions on the

inclusion model and its implementation in classrooms today. This study was conducted

in an elementary school (grades one through five) in a K-12 public school district in

Roosevelt Township, New Jersey. The participants were 27 second and third grade

multiage students as well as 7 second and third grade teachers with varied teaching

experiences and certifications. Teacher participants completed open-ended

questionnaires while student participants completed surveys in which they used a rating

scale to assign their comfort level with varied example situations. Data from the surveys

was recorded in percentages. Students' written narratives and oral commentary were also

analyzed to obtain more information about students' points of view. A significant finding

of the study was that both teachers and students find value and success in the

implementation of inclusion, although teachers indicated that some improvements could

be made. Implications for future research include examining inclusion in other multiage

classroom settings to determine the success of inclusion in multiage classrooms.

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To my family, for loving and supporting me. To Mommy, thank you for always being there for me and rescuing me whenever I needed help. To Pops, thank you for giving me the opportunity to go to college and giving me everything I ever needed. To Shinney, thank you for being such a loving brother and for missing me so much when I went away to college.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

My cooperating teacher discussed her fourth grade students with me on my first day in the classroom.

"Joey's basically the school delinquent. He sells condoms in the locker room, punches people on the bus, and curses at teachers. He serves his detention and suspension time with an attitude. Joey can be a really mean kid."

By that same afternoon, students were also explaining and describing their fellow classmates. As the students entered the classroom, they all greeted and waved to the student already seated in the very front of the room. Krysten, who has cerebral palsy, did not let her wheelchair interfere with friendships or relationships of any kind. Krysten spoke fondly of all of her teachers, aides, friends, peers, and classmates.

"That" Krysten said while motioning to the desk next to her wheelchair "is where my friend Joey sits."

I looked at the empty desk next to Krysten's. The top of the small desk was cleared, and the compartment below it was neatly packed with books and pencils, like any "regular" fourth graders would be. I looked back at Krysten's desk, a very tall and wide desk, with its compartment on the side filled with half eaten snacks, scattered crayons and laminated magazine pictures instead of books. While Krysten's desk looked odd for a classroom, her wheelchair fit perfectly underneath it.

"Do you want me to read to you?" Krysten offered eagerly. "You can sit in

Joey's desk since he is absent. I know that he wouldn't mind."

I sat in Joey's desk and had to look up a bit to see Krysten's head. Her face was

angled sideways, but her big blue eyes stared right at me. She attempted a

crooked smile, and struggled to place her hand in mine. Krysten seemed so warm

and friendly, to everyone. As a newcomer, she welcomed me with hugs and

smiles. To her class of friends, she gave compliments and asked questions about

their feelings and progress in the school day. It was obvious: the girl with

cerebral palsy was happy to have me in her classroom, so that she could show off

all of her best friends.

I met Krysten's friend, Joey, a week later. While he did not greet the teacher, or

seem to notice my presence in the classroom, his connection with Krysten was obvious.

He sat down next to her and immediately started a conversation. He put himself at eye

level so that she could see him without straining in her seat. Throughout the morning, he

helped her and checked to make sure that she was okay, even offering to push her

wheelchair to the next classroom. Watching them interact was amazing.

<div align="center">Background</div>

After my teacher had vividly described Joey's unfortunate background and

shattered home life, she provided details of his actions and behavior in school. I accepted

and understood her explanation and description of Joey, until I met Krysten and learned

about Joey through her eyes and heart. My mind was racing. *'How? How could this be*

the same kid?' How can this delinquent classified student, this *"nasty"* boy, be so loved

and admired by the girl strapped in the wheelchair?' I was amazed at how these two

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(very different) students interacted, understood and most of all learned from one another. It led me to question and think more about how such feelings and relationships could be fostered in the inclusion classroom.

For years, educational settings were divided between students with disabilities and those without. Beginning in 1975, with The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which was later reauthorized and renamed The Individuals With Disabilities Act in 1990, the special education law revolved around the least restrictive environment (Snyder, 2001). The least restrictive environment stated that children with disabilities be included in a regular classroom with interaction with non-disabled peers "to the maximum extent possible" (Dybvik, 2004). Education later began mainstreaming special education students, which meant teaching handicapped and non-disabled children in the same classroom (Schemo, 2002). With educational reforms, the least restrictive environment and mainstreaming led to the term of inclusion, which mandates that students with disabilities be educated in the general education program (Snyder, 2001). Studies of inclusion (Ferguson, 1999) reveal that although more work is needed, profound progress has been made for students with special needs (Falvey, 2004). With inclusion recognized as a way to include special education students in a general education classroom, questions now emerge as to who is really benefiting from inclusion.

There is a large body of research on inclusion, which brings both approval of it by some school districts, and criticism from others (Snyder, 2001). Much research shows many benefits to inclusion, and also reveals teachers' and students' opinions of it (Snyder, 5). Nevertheless, simply looking at past research is not enough. Ferguson, (1999) argues that although research can "provide interesting insight to questions that

have not yet been asked of high school students regarding their feelings about inclusion and will hopefully encourage other educators to explore their own students' attitudes" (p. 4), simply looking at past research is not enough. The education system is constantly changing and with it come new situations and settings. To fully understand inclusion and its impact on students, staff, teachers and parents, more research is needed (Ferguson, 1999).

Research Questions

In this project, I studied the ways in which teachers implement the inclusion model. I first asked: Can the inclusion model be implemented to benefit all students? With this question about inclusion's effectiveness, come many others. Other questions arise and become: How do teachers feel about inclusion? How do they physically implement it? How do students feel about the process, both students with special needs and those without?

Statement of the Problem

"Toward Realization of the Least Restrictive Educational Environments for Severely Handicapped Students" (Brown, et. al., 1997) framed my understanding and provided a historical perspective on inclusion. Many researchers and authors also credit this conceptual research with the founding ideas of inclusion. "Toward Realization of the Least Restrictive Educational Environments for Severely Handicapped Students" clearly states that participation of the handicapped in any and all community and school activities is "inherently good" (Brown, et. al., 1997). This research paves the way and serves as a guide for future educational opportunities such as inclusion (Falvey, 2004).

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A survey of 196 general education students in a suburban high school in Niagara Falls, Ontario provides another crucial source of information. In "High School Students Attitudes Toward Inclusion of Handicapped Students in the Regular Education Classroom," Ferguson (1999) found results revealing that most general education students did not want to be in a classroom with disabled students and that the handicapped do not belong in regular education classrooms. While the survey was based on high school students, some truth is revealed in student's opinions and reactions to people that are different than them, in this case, people with disabilities or special needs. This survey revealed students' negativity toward the presence of special needs students and brought to light some positives and negatives of the inclusion model.

Stories by parents, advocates, and teachers can deepen the understanding of inclusion. The true story of five-year-old Thomas Ellerson, whose cerebral palsy did not keep him from a kindergarten classroom, is one example of ways that stories and commentary from parents and teachers can add information to this study. Another powerful article, titled "18 Is Not Enough" by Snyder Romney, reveals the importance of inclusion for handicapped students from the view of a foster mother of eighteen disabled boys. As a parent advocate, she brings to light the variety of diseases and disabilities which many special education students face, and the experiences, which they are capable of having in regular classrooms and in daily life activities. The article takes inclusion from an educational level to a social level. The situations and events of the lives of these eighteen boys tell much of the opportunities and possibilities which inclusion can foster. With inclusion, "barriers have been broken, dreams have been defined" (Snyder, 2001, p. 7).

Definitions and Limitations

While a clear and thorough understanding of inclusion is important to me, I understand that it is a lofty goal to hope to include all sides of the topic and the views and opinions of different groups. Consequently, there are limitations to my study. One major limitation is the response of students to a survey about this topic. While many students may be honest in their views about their classroom, many may not be inclined to give their opinions if they are negative or condescending toward other students. While many students may not feel comfortable in their inclusion setting or may not truly feel "included," their feelings might not be revealed in their surveys due to fear of who may be reading them.

Another limitation lies in acquiring a broad range of teacher responses. While teachers may have differing opinions of inclusion, their responses will hold true to the specific classrooms in which they are placed, regardless of their opinions on the subject. Teachers may comment solely on their current classroom settings and the success or failure of inclusion in that particular setting, without also including other ideas or past experiences they may have had.

Organization of Thesis

The following chapters will discuss related research and studies, my own research design and context, and the results of my study. The second chapter will describe current research and past studies on inclusion classrooms. While there exists an abundance of information, select research articles were reviewed and chosen. Methodology, materials, and procedures for the study are explained in chapter three. Chapter four presents the results of the study as answers to the research questions of the study presented in this first

chapter. Chapter five includes a discussion of the findings and the implications for schools, teachers, and students.

Chapter 2

Review of Related Research

<u>Overview</u>

In order to fully understand the topic of inclusion and the use of inclusion, one must first research and study what has previously been learned. In this chapter, I discuss some of this research. Much of the research is conceptual, that is, it relates to opinions of teachers about inclusion and offers various definitions of inclusion. Although much research exists, this chapter focuses on four main areas: educational acts that provide a rationale for inclusion, definitions of inclusion, benefits and disadvantages of inclusion, and opinions of teachers and students regarding the inclusion model.

<u>Background of Educational Acts</u>

Crucial laws such as the Education of All Handicapped Children Act passed in 1975 have created the methodology of inclusion. This law is based on the principle of least restrictive environment, bringing handicapped children out of segregation and into various other types of classrooms and programs. In 1990, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act was reauthorized and renamed IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act.) This act mandated that children with disabilities be offered a free and appropriate education in which special education and special education services are available. Also, with the addition of legal documents such as IEP's (Individualized Education Plans,) progress has been made from a legal standpoint, thus affecting educational services for students. Today, segregated schools have been

transformed into places, which serve children of all disabilities. Although changes continue to occur, progress has surely been made (Falvey, 2004). Dybvik, Ferguson and Snyder (2004) have begun to discuss the topic, revealing that all levels of special education students can find success in "regular" classrooms. There are indeed positive impacts of inclusion for both classified and non-classified students (Brown, et. al. 1977). Such impacts call for a change in the service delivery models used within classrooms (Falvey, 2004).

<u>Rationale for Inclusion</u>

Brown et. al. (1977) introduce inclusion and provide an argument for the support of inclusion. To understand the importance of inclusion within school, one must know the history. In 1977, handicapped students were segregated during the majority of their time in school; yet, they successfully participated in almost all other activities with those students and adults who were non-handicapped (Brown, et. al., 1977). With the educational changes since 1977, handicapped citizens now have the right to be part of communities and there is awareness that participation by all types of people is beneficial. Schools should be places in which this participation can be implemented, allowed, and fostered. While briefly reviewing existing service delivery models such as self-contained schools, self-contained units, and self-contained classrooms, Brown, et. al. (1977) suggest that "severely handicapped students be educated with non-handicapped students, in settings that encourage and support extensive long-term interaction (p. 1). Interactions between handicapped and non-handicapped students foster "the development of skills, attitudes, and values that will prepare both groups to be sharing, participating, contributing members of complex, post school communities (p. 2). While noting the

importance of integration and inclusion of handicapped students, there also exist barriers and issues regarding the creation of environments necessary for the success of such methods. Some of these issues include the ratio between handicapped and non-handicapped students, funding, chronological age-appropriate settings, and equal access to school facilities and resources (Brown, et. al., 1997).

While Brown et. al. (1977) provided a foundation for inclusion rationale, Hehir (2003) also reveals a broad goal of social integration through the use of the inclusion model (p. 1). While full inclusion is still a debated topic by educators and researchers, successful inclusion educational settings can be used to meet the needs of some students (Hehir, 2003). "First and foremost our goal should be to maximize the educational development of all disabled students to enable them to fully participate in all aspects of life" (p. 1). Inclusion can be used to build educational and social communities in which students of all levels and abilities can be included (Hehir, 2003).

<u>Definitions of Inclusion</u>

Questions arise as to the definition of inclusion during the changes in the 1970's and also in schools today. Is there more to inclusion than just simply "integrating" and "including" special education or handicapped students in classrooms with the help of special education teachers? (Solomon, 1996). In an article titled "Conclusions on Inclusion" (Fink, 2004), one supervisor and teacher came to a working definition of inclusion as "mainstreaming special education students into a population of general education students" (p. 1) but this very same teacher clearly declared "I wish it were that simple" (p. 2). Speech and language pathologist Ann Dybvik has a different definition of inclusion, possibly shaped by her work as an autism resource consultant. From her

standpoint, the idea behind inclusion is that all children should be equally valued members of the school culture (Dybvik, 2004). Yet another understanding of the model reveals that full inclusion is not only to be used to keep students at grade level, but to instill appropriate social skills (Snyder, 2001). Even advocates of inclusion state different purposes for it, including educational, cultural and social benefits to all students. With the different purposes and understandings of inclusion come different types of inclusion or ways of implementing it. Little research exists on inclusion practices within multiage classrooms, although the benefits and disadvantages described below can be applied to a variety of classroom settings.

While the laws and views of inclusion are aimed at helping special education children, there still exist gaps between determining student's needs and giving them age-appropriate materials regardless of their disabilities. The current IDEA regulations require that "educators provide all students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum – that is, the same curriculum provided to students without disabilities" (Falvey, 2004, p. 1). For many schools today, some special education students are placed in inclusion classrooms for different parts of the day to start out the year, changing their placements permanently as they succeed in the inclusion classroom. For my research and the purpose of this research paper, I define the inclusion model as an educational method in which students of varied levels and abilities are included in all learning experiences to the maximum extent possible. From the various definitions and understandings of inclusion, which were reviewed in this section, come different opinions of its effectiveness, both benefits and disadvantages.

Benefits of Inclusion

Inclusion benefits all children – children with disabilities and also those without disabilities (Dybvik, 2004). For handicapped students, benefits begin with their basic presence in a "regular classroom." Barriers can be broken, erasing special education students' notion that they were completely "different" from other students because they spent their school days in a different classroom with different materials, different teachers, and a different schedule (Dyvbik, 2004). Thus, inclusion can reduce the stigma and negative labels of special education students (Snyder, 2001). For non-handicapped students, the presence of those with various disabilities or physical handicaps can be eye opening. Under inclusion, non-handicapped students are exposed to diversity on a new level. Special education students reveal different talents, different temperaments and different learning styles and techniques (Dybvik, 2004).

Inclusion stresses the importance of all children, thus revealing benefits for all children as a whole. Through daily interaction across activities and environments, inclusion promotes the value of all students as members of the human community. On a very basic level, all students have a right to belong and to be included, regardless of any individual differences or abilities. Inclusion provides strong opportunities for students to gain an acceptance and understanding of one another, which can be viewed as one goal of education as a whole. Mara Sapon-Shevin (2004), professor and advocate for inclusive education believes that "inclusion is consistent with multicultural educations, and [with] a world in which many more people have opportunities to know, play, and work with one another" (Dybvik, 2004, p. 3).

<u>Disadvantages of Inclusion</u>

With the benefits of inclusion also come a variety of problematic or negative aspects. One major component is the cost. In an article entitled "Modest Changes Seen for Special Education" from The New York Times in 2002, special education funding is discussed. For example, 6.5 million special education children are served nationally at a cost of $78 billion a year (Schemo, 2002). Well-implemented inclusion costs more than separate special-education classrooms. Inclusion requires staff support, paraprofessionals, physical and instructional accommodations, differentiated materials, and adaptive equipment and technology. Also, administration must often reduce the number of students in each classroom. Another cost is that of training, and as it will be revealed later in this chapter, the training of staff and teachers is crucial (Dybvik, 2004).

Another negative in regards to inclusion is the training and commitment that are needed to make it successful. Despite opinions about the actual theory and use of inclusion, many teachers feel that they are not trained for or do not possess the experience to successfully implement an inclusive environment. Dybvik (2004) argues that "inclusion forces regular-classroom teachers to face challenges for which they were never properly trained" (p. 2). For many teachers, serious concerns arise which lead them to question if inclusion actually benefits all students. Many general education teachers feel that inclusion benefits the handicapped students at the expense of the regular education students. Inclusion can cause teachers to feel that they are shortchanging regular education students when they must deal with special education students. Some teachers also feel that inclusion requires them to "dumb down" lessons or water down the

curriculum so that all students can learn the same information and be on the same page (Dybvik, 2004).

Teachers' Views of Inclusion

In the fall of 1999, Rebecca Finley Snyder wrote "Inclusion: A Qualitative Study of In-service general Education Teachers' Attitudes and Concerns." The study was designed to collect information regarding attitudes, opinions and concerns about special education within their own schools. The participants were in-service teachers in graduate level classes and workshops taught by Snyder in various sites over approximately one-third of the counties in the state and at Coastal Carolina University in Conway, South Carolina. The teachers were asked to provide information and views regarding special education, support provided, and the training that they had received for working with students with special needs. In all of the schools surveyed, special education consisted of resource room teachers, some aides, mainstreaming and some inclusion. None of the teachers reported the existence of total inclusion (Snyder, 2001). Tables and percentages were provided to summarize the results, which were collected. Overall, most of the teachers did not think that their administrators were supportive of the needs of the general education teacher in regards to mainstreaming of inclusive. The teachers did not feel support due to the lack of training for the general education faculty. Some of the comments made by general education teachers are provided below. They provide a small example of the many concerns expressed by teachers.

"The administration has not, since I have been teaching at my school, provided any in-service on special education students" (p. 3).

"The resource teacher will send a list of students to the respective teachers

informing them which students are learning disabled along with a sheet for some

modifications for teaching or classroom instruction. We do not sit down and plan

for the instruction of the child together. The resource teacher does not come to

the class to check on the child" (p. 4).

"In my undergraduate work, I had one special education course. I still lack the

training necessary to work with or handle special education students in my

classes" (p. 4).

The study points out that general education teachers need to be fully trained and prepared

by the school or school district to work with special education students if inclusive

education is going to work (Snyder, 2001).

Another study designed to obtain teachers' views of inclusion was conducted in

1992. 50 educators were chosen to serve as full-time consulting teachers as which they

designed and implemented special education pre-referral procedures and inclusion

classrooms within their schools. They attended training on a vast range of topics

including methods for adapting curriculum, collaborative teaching techniques,

accountability procedures, and methods for creating classroom communities (Solomon,

1996). This study showed a variety of benefits for both teachers and students. Results

revealed a decrease in inappropriate referrals to special education by 33%. New teachers

reported feeling "extremely supported" and general educators felt less threatened by the

processes involved (p. 2).

<u>Students' Views on Inclusion</u>

Another crucial research study was conducted in by Ferguson in 1999. The survey, entitled "High School Students' Attitudes Toward Inclusion of Handicapped Students in the Regular Education Classroom," included 196 regular education students from a suburban school in Niagara Falls, Ontario. The study was conducted by 9th and 12th grade high school students in a school that has been implementing inclusion for the past six years. By adapting Wilczenski's Inclusive Education Scale, which asks students to agree or disagree with statements, Ferguson was able to receive raw data and results. Overall, 67% of the students did not want to be in the same class as students with disabilities. The majority also agreed or strongly agreed that severely handicapped children do not belong in a regular education classroom. While 33% believe that there is an academic benefit, 52% felt that there is a social benefit to inclusion. Gender also played an important role in the results. 54% of the girls thought that inclusion is "the right thing to do" compared to only 32% of the boys. On a separate note, students who had been involved in a peer-tutoring program had a more positive and accepting view of inclusion. Results first revealed that just exposing students to inclusion did not change their attitudes over time. With this, regular education students who had taken part in peer tutoring had more positive attitudes than those who did not. In regards to gender, the survey revealed that girls tend to be less negative in their attitudes toward their handicapped peers. The survey clearly reveals that teachers are not the only ones who require support and training in dealing with, understanding and accepting inclusion and the students who come into the classroom through the inclusion model.

While these results are specific to the school in which the survey was conducted, the results are still clear, and both gender and peer tutoring play a crucial role. The results about peer tutoring reveal that inclusion does not guarantee interaction between handicapped students and non-handicapped students but that "peer appreciation of diversity must be nurtured" (Ferguson, 1999, p. 3). While the study has limitations, this survey is, nevertheless, important to the study of inclusion and to students' opinions about it. The study also encourages other educators to explore other students' attitudes, opinions, and concerns regarding inclusion and its practice (Ferguson, 1999).

Another crucial aspect of inclusion is that it encourages collaboration between special education and general education teachers (Snyder, 2001). It is very important for general and special education teachers to communicate about improvements that can be made. For the proper implementation of inclusion, the first step is improving the training of teachers (Dybvik, 2004). Inclusion can generate new ideas, techniques and strategies that can all combine to a better way to teach students. For that to work, teachers must share responsibilities and actual teaching time. Teachers must also be flexible and not be afraid to make adjustments to teaching methods and styles (Dybvik, 2004). With a variety of learners, it will be important to use a variety of techniques and tools. To successfully implement inclusion, it is also important to not make a distinction between the special education and general education students (Fink, 2004).

Conclusion

Overall, there is clear research that provides information about and views of inclusion from various points of view. Even with varying definitions of the model of inclusion, its presence within schools is stable. The articles discussed in this chapter

reveal that research is being done on the topic, and the opinions and views of both students and teachers are being surveyed, looked at and evaluated. It is clear that there is much more to inclusion than the actual act of including special education students into a general education classroom. There is still work to be done to accurately reveal various views of inclusion and techniques and methods for its successful implementation.

This study will add to the research base by offering further insight into the actual effectiveness of inclusion. This study will provide more viewpoints on the topic, including those of teachers and students, both general education and special education. Finally, this study will offer ways in which teachers can implement inclusion in multiage settings and how students of all abilities and disabilities can be impacted by its implementation.

Chapter 3

Research Design

<u>Context and Setting</u>

<u>School District</u>

Roosevelt Township, New Jersey is a very large area, with a population of 47,000 people. The median income for each household in Roosevelt Township is around $67,000. A majority of the population of individuals 18 or over has a high school diploma, roughly 89.9% of the population. Additionally, 30.4% of this population has a bachelor's degree or higher. Only 913 people in the Roosevelt Township area is unemployed, while only 462 households earn less than $10,000 a year. A majority of the households in Roosevelt Township, roughly 3,700 households, earn between $50,000 and $75,000 a year.

The Roosevelt Township School District offers a counseling program at no cost to the parents to help provide assistance to individuals and families dealing with stress, divorce, martial issues, family management skills, single parenting, communication skills, and other situations. Additionally the school district has several support groups for parents and community members who need additional support. The Parent Support Group is for parents who have children in drug and alcohol recovery programs. The group meets several times a month to help support one another with coping strategies, and allow each other to share their experiences, but the meetings are limited to families who are currently dealing with a family member who is abusing drugs. The other organization is the Mother's Cupboard, which helps collect donations of food and

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clothing, which is donated to families who are living in poverty and need the additional materials.

School community

There are 525 students enrolled at T.J. Elementary School in grades one through five. The average class size ranges from 20-23 students, but the multiage classrooms are larger, ranging in size from 30-32 students. The school has one Transitional first grade class, two self-contained special education classrooms, along with 23 general education classrooms grades 1-5. 11.7% of the students in T.J. Elementary have been classified with some type of learning disability and have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). A majority of the students who make up this population are enrolled in general education classrooms, with the exception of several students who make up the self-contained classroom.

Community is always a crucial part in the development of a child, and an entire community of learners within a school district. T.J. Elementary School is not an exception. There are a variety of programs that help the students cope with events in their lives, such as divorce, and to include students in after school programs such as the Homework Club and intramural sports. T.J. Elementary School offers students a support group to help children cope with separation and divorce.

The T.J. Elementary School also has a very active Parent-Teacher Organization, which has several fundraisers in the school to help earn money for the students. The PTO collects Campbell Soup Labels from products such as Pepperidge Farms, Prego, Franco American and Swanson for the *Labels for Education* program. Additionally, the collect the UPC labels from General Mills products for the *Boxtops for Education* program, and

Super G Grocery store has a program in which students save their store receipts to earn money for their school. Additionally, each time an individual uses their Target Charge Card, 1% of the value of the individual's purchases are donated to a school district of their choice.

Multiage Community

There are two multiage classrooms at T.J. Elementary School in Paulsville, New Jersey. The multiage classrooms follow their own unique, curriculum, they work with one another to complete various projects, and follow a looping pattern in which the students complete second through fifth grade in the multiage classrooms. There is a second and third grade multiage and a fourth and fifth grade multiage.

The 2/3 multiage classroom is made up of a community of learners who work and play together. The program is very unique in that it combines an equal number of second and third grade students who complete their studies under two full time teachers. Students enter in the voluntary program in second grade, and remain in the 2/3 multiage classroom through third grade to complete a two-year curriculum. After third grade, the students are promoted to the 4/5 multiage classroom. Students in the multiage program represent a community of learners from different grade and age levels, where the children learn together in both the academic and social areas. Learning takes place through thematic units, which are derived from the science and social studies curriculum, and is supported by books read during Language Arts period.

The multiage classrooms are each taught by two teachers: a dual certified teacher in special education and elementary education, and one elementary education teacher. The students in the class come from a diverse background, which includes ethnicity, race,

educational background, and economic background. There are a total of three special education students in the MA 2/3 class. Students range in age and abilities in this classroom, but their differences never prevent them from helping one another. There are many interactive and hands-on activities and lessons used to generate student interest, as well as parent volunteers who come in bi-weekly to read with the students.

There are various ways in which parents are involved in the multiage classrooms. In the MA 2/3 class, the parents are involved in a V.I.P. reading program, in which parents come in during the afternoon to read to the students. Additionally, there are various planned activities, such as the Heart Smart Breakfast, which occurs on Valentine's Day, in which the parents of students in both multiage classrooms come to the school to cook the students' breakfast. Additionally, the parents sign the students' assignment books each night, along with tests and quizzes that are designated for the parents to sign and return.

The students in the Multiage (MA) classrooms have a unique relationship, both with the peers in their own classroom, and also with the other MA class. Within each classroom, there is a diverse group of students with a range of needs and abilities. The students of both classrooms consider themselves to be one community and do in fact work together on most activities, lessons and projects. The exception is math in where they are split by grade level. The teachers are not classified as a specific general or special education teacher or even as a particular grade level teacher. Instead, the teachers co-teach the entire class together.

The students are aware that they are in a unique program, and most are proud of it! Visits and observations of the classroom will reveal students singing friendship songs,

reading to one another, cleaning and feeding class animals together and sitting in large circle in which a visitor would not be able to tell which students were second graders and which were third. When asked about their classroom during discussion or during writing assignments, the students often refer to their classroom as "special" and feel proud to work with students of a different grade.

Management and Curriculum Policies

According to a member of the Child Study Team which discussed information about the school and surrounding areas with the co-teach MST students, the T.J. Elementary School has a school wide discipline policy. While this policy is in effect for the entire school, many of the classrooms have adapted the school wide rules with their own classroom rules. This is the first year the school wide discipline policy known as TJ Rules has been in effect, and as to date there have been no major discipline problems in the school. The TJ Rules are not only posted in the classrooms, but also throughout the school to remind and reinforce to the students that there are certain rules and obligations that the students must follow.

Research Design

For my project, I am using a qualitative research design. Observations, surveys and commentary become important data sources. Due to the multiage program within this school, personal surveys and questionnaires are used to reveal an honest opinion of the program.

The type of qualitative research I used most closely parallels that of a phenomenological study. Phenomenological studies focus on "people's perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a particular situation" (Leedy, Ormond, 139); they

look closely at people's experiences and lead to a better understanding of the experiences of others. A phenomenological study is appropriate for this project because students' and teachers' views on inclusion are needed. The views and perceptions of these two groups of people reveal much about the effectiveness of the implementation of inclusion. A phenomenological study also allows real life experiences to be revealed and information to be gathered from those who have experienced inclusion classrooms or teaching.

Data Sources

I have five data sources for my research. As my first data source, I designed a teacher questionnaire. The questionnaire required teachers to provide the specific area of their educational certification and training and reveal their opinions of inclusion. They were encouraged to give examples of both successful and unsuccessful situations or settings involving inclusion.

For my second data source, I conducted a student survey in which general education and special education students were asked questions regarding their learning environment. One of my goals was to determine how it affected the inclusion of special needs students, if at all.

Student narratives were also collected as a third data source. Students were asked to write about their experiences in their multiage classroom. Students were allowed to write about whatever topic or situation they would like, something that they liked or did not like. A random sample of the students' written narratives were collected and reviewed.

Another useful data source was student comments prior to and after a lesson and the reading of a book about differences. The students all gathered to listen to me read the

book, It's Okay to Be Different by Todd Parr. Afterwards, we discussed how the book might apply to some of their lives. These student comments were collected for the fourth data source.

My fifth and final data source was my teacher-researcher journal and field notes. My recorded notes include key moments, situations, and examples of the practice of inclusion.

School and legal documents became another useful data source. Reading and understanding legal documents regarding inclusion, such as student IEP's and child study team referral documents better enabled me to understand the school's plan of implementation. I also familiarized myself with the school's inclusion policy, consequently, I was able to gain an understanding of the common knowledge that teachers and staff hold about inclusion.

Data Analysis

Once my data was collected, I looked across the information to gain a comprehensive understanding of the contents. Using index cards and post-it notes, I classified the data into categories and began to break down each category. I separated students' opinions, ideas and experiences from those of teachers. After organizing the materials to get a "sense" of the data and classify it into groups, I was able to synthesize all of the information on the topic and identify major themes.

With the five data sources collected and themes identified, I was able to validate and check the accuracy of my results as suggested by Creswell (2003). I used the various sources to triangulate my data. I also used member checking with students during discussions as another way to validate suggested findings.

Chapter 4

Research Findings

"When I was just about to be in a Multiage classroom, I felt really good because there were 2 different grades in just one classroom. As soon as I walked in the classroom, I felt so welcome I knew that this class was going to be the best! I really like this classroom because there are lots of different kinds of subjects, more than other regular classrooms. This classroom is so special to me because it's different. This is also a very special class because there were more special teachers in the class, so that made the class even more special. This is the best class there ever was! There are also so many different kinds of things to do in Multiage 2/3. I feel so special since I am in a special classroom."
(Second-grade student).

<u>Introduction</u>

The following chapter presents the results of the surveys and questionnaires, as well as the opinions gathered from student narratives and commentary. Some of the data is described through use of charts; other data is presented in a narrative form, using quotations or transcripts of student views and opinions. The findings of the study are discussed across several major themes derived from the various data sources: lack of training, advantages of inclusion settings, acceptance of others, and the use of multiage inclusion.

Lack of Training

The teacher responses provided information about inclusion classrooms and their effectiveness or ineffectiveness. 7 second and third grade teachers completed a questionnaire of 10 sections (Appendix A: Teacher Questionnaire). The 7 teachers surveyed represented varied educational backgrounds and certifications; their responses were also varied concerning the effectiveness of inclusion and their ability to successfully implement it. While all 7 have co-taught in classrooms, only 3 felt completely comfortable teaching special education children. One teacher was "in between" comfort levels but 3 felt unprepared or uncomfortable teaching special education alone.

One teacher revealed these feelings of inadequacy and lack of preparation by stating the following:

"When I first started to work with special education children in my regular education classroom, I was not prepared and was very apprehensive. I have become more comfortable and capable from experience. I took classes/in-services that gave me information. I worked closely with various special education teachers who taught me much."

The teachers surveyed described unsuccessful inclusion settings by giving a variety of reasons and examples of what lacked at their school in the area of training. When asked if adequate training is available in teaching special education students, most teachers felt there was not. One teacher noted, "Unless you are able to take college courses and/or attend many workshops, most of what you learn is on your own. There is a lot of trial and error learning." Another teacher commented that there is also a problem of

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"inadequate trained assistance in the classroom" referring to aides and staff who lack training for working with special education students. These results are consistent with the research, which attribute lack of training to many unsuccessful inclusion settings (Snyder, 2001). All of the teachers' surveys revealed a need for inclusion but did not show a significant belief in success through its current implementation. One teacher noted, "I think inclusion is good if it is set up and staffed properly." The teacher survey revealed the potential benefits of inclusion only if training and education for staff and teachers is improved.

Advantages of Inclusion Settings

Disregarding the insufficient training, however, teachers did note many advantages and positive experiences with inclusion. One teacher simply stated that through inclusion "'regular students' learn to be more sensitive to all students." A second teacher also noted the stereotype of "regular students." She commented, "The 'regular kids' learn to appreciate the special needs kids – and they learn that everyone has special needs." Other advantages that the teachers listed included good role modeling, learning to accept differences, development of social skills and increased self-esteem for all of the students involved. Many teachers noted the positive presence of two teachers in the classroom. One teacher described her view on the roles of two teachers by stating:

> "I feel all students can benefit from having two teachers in the classroom. There
> is a shared instructional responsibility between both teachers. Special education
> students are able to be successful in the regular education classroom."

Another teacher stated "Two teachers – one regular education and one special education, working together is terrific to meet the needs of many levels of kids."

Overall, the teachers noted a setting in which success can be found for all students through respect and collaboration.

<div align="center">Students' Voices</div>

Acceptance of Others

27 students completed a survey with 10 statements, requiring them to rate their feelings about inclusive classrooms. (Appendix B: Student Survey). The first section of the student survey was used to gauge how the students feel about their current classroom situation. (Appendix C: Student Survey Results). 97% of the students surveyed felt completely comfortable with having a student in their classroom with a wheelchair, while 59% felt completely comfortable with a student who required a hearing device or special keyboard to communicate. Interestingly, these results are inconsistent with a study of high school students (Ferguson, 1999) that revealed 67% of the students did not want to be in the same class as students with disabilities. Yet, there exists a crucial difference between the two studies and thus the results: the participants in my study were elementary school students while Ferguson's work focused on high school students.

The second part of the student survey addressed possible situations for the students, using the same smiley face scale. Percentages were found for each question, revealing that most students enjoyed the varied age or ability classroom and that they would not like a classroom in which everyone learned the same way or was just like them. 89% of the students surveyed indicated that they would not be happy or comfortable in classroom in which all of the students in their class were just like them. Only 4% of the students would not be comfortable working with someone who did not learn in the same way that they do. These results reveal that the students involved in this

multiage inclusion setting not only accept being in a classroom with students with disabilities but that they have a general interest in working with people different than themselves.

Multiage Inclusion

The students were also given a writing assignment requiring them to give their opinion on their MA 2/3 classroom. Students were told to write about something that they liked, or something that they did not like. No further directions or prompts were given. The students completed this assignment independently in class without peer or parental input. Student responses clearly show appreciation for their classroom and respect for others' opinions and ideas. Some student excerpts are included below.

"I think Multiage 2/3 is special because it's two grades together. Also, I enjoy helping the other kids." (Third grade student)

"I love Multiage 2/3 because we are all not the same age. You get to meet other people that are older or younger than you." (Third grade student)

"The activities we do in Multiage 2/3 are fun because we get to do the activities together." (Second grade student)

"I didn't want to sit in a boring old ordinary 2nd or 3rd grade class." (Third grade student)

"Sometimes when you get put in groups, you don't always agree." (Third grade student)

"What I think is special about Multiage is how second and third graders are in the same classroom. We make more friends that way." (Second grade student.)

The written narratives collected from these students reveal a strong student understanding of the ways in which one classroom can "work" with a variety of students. While the students noted the differences among them, they also commented on the positive aspects and situations, which can arise from this inclusion of all students.

Understanding of Differences

After reading, It's Okay To Be Different by Todd Parr to the class, a discussion was held. The students were actively engaged in the situations which the book suggested and needed no prompts to begin sharing ways in which these situations might apply to them. As I re-read each page of the book, students were allowed to give a real life example of that statement or situation and discuss whether that "difference" was an adequate or appropriate reason to not be friends with someone or not work with them in school.

Student responses indicate that the students are well aware of their differences from each other based on religion, race, hobbies, abilities, needs and family life. Upon reading the words "It's okay to be a different color," and showing a picture with a black/white zebra next to a rainbow zebra, one student explained, "just because I'm black doesn't mean I shouldn't do the same math and reading as everybody else" (Teacher-researcher journal April 7, 2005). Interpreting the sentence, "It's okay to come from a different place," one student explained that it could mean lots of things and it's okay to come from a different country, a different school, or even a different kind of classroom.

Students' talk about book discussions coincides with the student surveys and written narratives. While the students acknowledge their differences, they do not feel that differences impact the ability to be a community of learners during school time or

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friends outside of school. When shown a picture of a blind girl walking next to her seeing eye dog and hearing the sentence, "It's okay to need some help" the students were quick to point out that we all need help sometimes, even the teachers! Clearly, as these comments suggest, the students are accepting and understanding of others and can support one another, even in terms of their different needs or areas of weakness.

Scribbled comments and notes from my teacher-researcher journal also supported themes of understanding differences and student acceptance of one another. I noted the pride the multiage 2/3 students showed when a self-contained student received a friendship award, even though this student joins their class for only one period each day.

"Steven and KC were working together on the animal project. Steven wanted to draw, but KC doesn't want to be the group writer. KC refused, while Steven tried to accommodate. Steven explained project and calmly decided they share the jobs. KC agreed and gave input on their layout." (Teacher-researcher journal, May 27, 2005).

This journal account reveals the ability of multiage students to acknowledge their differences and work together despite their different ideas and views. "Never judge a book by its cover" and "Don't make fun of others because of what they have or what they don't have" are two powerful pieces of advice that I also received from students (Teacher-researcher journal, May 27, 2005).

<center>Summary</center>

In summary, the results of this study seem to suggest that there are critical requisites for effective inclusion classrooms, and shows strong opinions about its implementation. The data supports the current research on teachers' views of inclusion

and the need for further education and training for staff and teachers. The data also reveal a basic understanding and strong support of inclusion by multiage elementary school students. Specifically, students accept most differences and are willing to work in school with students of different ages, races, backgrounds, abilities, needs, and learning styles.

Chapter 5

Summary and Discussion

<u>Summary and Conclusion</u>

The purpose of this study was to gather opinions and ideas about inclusion from both students and teachers. In conclusion, I found positive opinions about inclusion from both students and teachers, however, they also suggested improvements to be made. Observations of students as well as teachers revealed a positive inclusion setting that might serve as a model for other inclusion classrooms.

The results found in this study suggest answers to the research questions posed in Chapter 1. First, my research indicates that inclusion can be a useful technique with which to educate various learners in one setting or environment. Secondly, survey responses of both teachers and students, provided further insights into how teachers and students feel about inclusion and also suggest both the benefits and the disadvantages of inclusion.

The teacher responses reveal a clearer understanding of the rationale of educating different levels of students in one classroom environment. These teachers' opinions directly coincide with other studies of teachers (Dybvik, 2004), (Snyder, 1999), citing lack of teacher training and sufficient time for collaboration as major drawbacks. One teacher argued, "There is not enough planning time with special education teachers." This same teacher further noted, "There is difficulty providing the necessary time for collaborative planning between teaching partners."

Past studies on the benefits of inclusion were also supported by teacher and student responses in my research. Students' surveys, comments and written narratives revealed an awareness and strong acceptance of others, just as Dybvik (2004) revealed that for non-handicapped students the presence of those with various disabilities or physical handicaps could be eye opening. The notion that special education students bring diverse talents, temperaments and learning styles to the classroom (Dybvik, 2004), was also supported; 59% of the students surveyed in this study revealed that they would be completely comfortable if someone in their class did not learn the same way that they did.

Surprisingly, the students surveyed attested to more than the various benefits of inclusion and the positive outcomes it may provide. The students revealed a positive reaction to the word "special" in their discussions, comments, and written narratives. When researching the topic of inclusion, "special education" is a key term. The students surveyed always noted the marked differences between students (including themselves) in a positive light. When referred to activities or situations in which they worked with different types of students and teachers, the students surveyed noted an enjoyment and pride in "helping other kids," "having two kinds of teachers," and "seeing what it's like to be with younger or older kids in the class."

<u>Implications and Recommendations</u>

By conducting survey and questionnaires with both teachers and students, I was able to gather opinions and ideas about a range of areas regarding inclusion. After examining the data, I have identified many ideas and various implications for further research. The data collected supports the implementation of inclusion while providing

evidence and suggestions for further research and training. I believe that the inclusion model can be successfully implemented with the proper training of staff, participation of staff and parents/guardians, as well as the establishment of appropriate goals and objectives by the teachers/staff for implementation. However, my surveys and questionnaires did not ask if teachers would in fact be willing to participate in thorough training and education that they state is currently lacking in their school district.

The inclusion model should be examined for its possible implementation in more classrooms. Further research would allow for a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of the inclusion model and it's potential impact in the classroom. These studies may also consider parent/guardian opinions to expand knowledge about the impacts of inclusion on students. Finally, it would be interesting to conduct a study in which parents were able to express their opinions about inclusion settings and classrooms, and to compare the results with the comments of teachers and students in this research. Perhaps I could have gathered information from a non-inclusive classroom in addition to the class surveyed to see what the opinions of inclusion were among strict general education students. It would have been interesting to understand the opinions and views of both teachers and students who have never been exposed to special education students or worked with them within the classroom.

This study also reveals the pressing need for further research on the topic of inclusion and its implementation in difference classroom settings. With my study of teachers and students in a multiage setting, I was able to learn about different types of inclusion and the types of programs through which it can be implemented. This study contributed to the knowledge about multiage inclusion classrooms. Thorough research of

multiage inclusion settings would provide more information on the topic and reveal the strengths of such settings. The rationale, benefits, disadvantages, uses and ways to implement inclusion would all be expanded with the understanding of inclusion from the perspective of members and staff of multiage classrooms.

In summary, in examining the views and opinions of teachers and students regarding the implementation of inclusion, this study suggests the need for further research in the area of inclusion in various learning environments. The results of future research could have significant implications on inclusion and could also support the view that inclusion can be successfully implemented in multiage classroom settings. While future research may support existing research (which establishes inclusion as effective although it requires time, money, planning and commitment) results might also support the disadvantages of inclusion. Regardless, future research could add other opinions, views, and types of inclusion and implementation techniques. In the end, teachers of various educational backgrounds and certifications as well as students of different abilities and levels can succeed in an inclusion classroom. Such settings provide an environment conducive for all students to participate in one learning community. Thus, continued research on the topic can only promote further understanding and development of the inclusion model.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Teacher Questionnaire

Teacher questionnaire

1. What teaching certifications do you hold?

2. What grade/level have you taught?

3. What grade/level do you currently teach?

4. Have you ever co-taught?

5. Do you feel you are prepared to teach special education students?

6. Do you feel there is adequate training available to you in teaching special education students?

7. How do you feel about the use of inclusion?

8. What are some advantages you feel come about through inclusion?

9. What downfalls do you feel come with the implementation of inclusion?

10. Please list and/or describe any particular experiences or moments that you have had within inclusion.

Appendix B

Student Survey

Number: _____

Circle 1 smiley face to choose how you feel about each statement.

How you feel about:

Being in this multiage 2/3 class

Having two teachers

Working with someone of a different grade

Having students different than you in your class

Having TAG students in your class

How would you feel if:

You had a student in your class who was in a wheelchair

You had a student in your class who had their own aide work with them

All of the students in your class were just like you

You had a student in your class who did not learn the same way that you do

You had a student in your class with a hearing device or a special keyboard to communicate

Appendix C

Student Survey Results

Student Survey Results

Item	Question	Feel comfortable	Feel neutral	Feel uncomfortable
1	How do you feel about being in this Multiage 2/3 classroom?	93%	7%	0%
2	How do you feel about having two teachers?	81%	19%	0%
3	How do you feel about working with someone of a different grade?	74%	26%	0%
4	How do you feel about having students different than you in your class?	81%	19%	0%
5	How do you feel about having TAG students in your class?	59%	37%	4%
6	How would you feel if you had a student in your class who was in a wheelchair?	41%	41%	18%
7	How would you feel if you had a student in your class who had their own aide work with them?	26%	48%	26%
8	How would you feel if all of the students in your class were just like you?	7%	4%	89%
9	How would you feel if you had a student in your class who did not learn the same way that you do?	59%	37%	4%
10	How would you feel if you had a student in your class with a hearing device or a special keyboard to communicate?	48%	41%	11%

Total Responses: 27