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**A case study of teacher's perceptions regarding special education students in regular education classrooms.**

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A CASE STUDY OF TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS  
REGARDING SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS  
IN REGULAR EDUCATION CLASSROOMS

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of Teacher Education

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

By

Heather Nebesniak

October 28, 1999

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,  
 University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the  
 Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,  
 University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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Date Nov. 23, 1999

A CASE STUDY OF TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS  
REGARDING SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS  
IN REGULAR EDUCATION CLASSROOMS

Heather Nebesniak

University of Nebraska, 1999

Advisor: Dr. Kenneth Smith

This multi-case descriptive study looked at teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusion of special education students in regular education classrooms. The study took place in a public elementary school. The participants were interviewed three times throughout the school year over a nine-month period. The researcher held the role as participant observer since the researcher is also a teacher in the same school. This study examined the process that teachers underwent as their school changed from providing a pull out program for special education students to an inclusion program. The school at where this study took place included both learning disabled students as well as gifted students under their special education inclusion plan. Participants in the study included regular education teachers, special education teachers, and school administrators.

Data was gathered through audio taped interviews and a researcher's journal. The audio taped interviews were conducted at the beginning, middle, and end of the school

year. Data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection by identifying coding categories and identifying themes and patterns in the interviews.

The study found that although most teachers had to undergo a substantial amount of modification due to the change in the special education program from a pull out program to an inclusion program, most teachers felt that the change was a positive one in terms of the school focusing on the needs of the students. The study also found that when the change occurred, it caused the participants to re-examine their perceptions of their roles as teachers.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### Statement of the Problem

School districts across the nation are continuing to follow educational trends and reform their schools' special education programs. This is largely due to an attempt to provide the least restrictive environment continuum of special education services mandated by Congress in 1975 through the Education of the Handicapped Act, Public Law 94-142. This effort has been refueled by the 1990 Individuals with Disabilities Act (I.D.E.A.) and the 1997 revision of I.D.E.A. It is this federal legislation that requires students with disabilities to be educated in general education classes along with peers who are not disabled. The changes that occur when moving from programs that segregate students with disabilities to programs that focus on integrating those students with their peers without disabilities have required adjustments in the structure and delivery of education at the federal, state and local levels (Powell and Hyle, 1997).

In the past, educational systems have developed separate special programs for students who were seen as unable to perform in the regular classroom. Typically, these programs consisted of pulling a student out from their peer group and placing them in a separate, self-contained environment in an effort to provide the needed assistance. While the assistance being offered may very well have been what the students needed, some educators believed that removing a student from the classroom did not mirror real life situations and in the long run conditioned students to be unable to interact and work in a heterogeneous environment (Stoler, 1992).

In an effort to comply with these beliefs and legislative mandates, many school systems altered their special education programs and curriculum to include special needs students in the regular classroom. Inclusion is not simply placing special needs students into the classroom and having the regular classroom teacher be solely responsible for the extra assistance needed. Modification and adjustments are necessary if the placement is to be successful for the students and the teacher (Chalmers, 1993). Awareness and understanding of P.L. 94-142 and I.D.E.A. must occur for all educators involved with inclusion. This includes obtaining knowledge of the eligibility of student placements, restructuring the curriculum, and identifying the least restrictive environment. In addition, involvement in a shared and collaborative decision making process must be developed by the administration and the educators involved in inclusion of special needs students (Powell and Hyle, 1997).

It is these factors that accompany recent policy changes in the special education programs at Pine View Elementary School. All participants' names, the name of the school, and the name of the town have been replaced for the presentation of this study. This was done in an effort to increase confidentiality for the participants of the study.

Recent administrative decisions about special education policy at Pine View Elementary School have required regular education teachers to include all special education students, gifted as well as disabled, in their classrooms for all academic instruction. The fact that this school placed as much emphasis on the gifted education program as the learning disabled program made the school different from many other elementary schools. The inclusion plan that the school implemented included the

replacement of both programs. Although special education staff would be assisting the classroom teachers, this was a considerable change from the previously used pull-out model of special education instruction.

The classroom teachers were informed of the policy change at the end of one school year and changes were to be implemented at the beginning of the next academic year. Although teachers were made aware that there would be changes coming the following year, no specifics were discussed. The program that the administration had decided on implementing was a significant change from the model of special education that was utilized in the previous year. The staff, as a whole, did not participate in the planning of the inclusion program. The staff was informed that additional information would be available at the start of the upcoming school year once specifics had been determined. No additional training or services were provided for classroom educators regarding the mandated changes before the changes were implemented. When teachers met for the beginning-of-the-year meetings, they were informed that there would be one classroom at each grade level that would accommodate the learning disabled students and another classroom would accommodate the gifted students. The decision as to what teachers would have the groups was left up to the special education teachers to discuss with the regular classroom teachers. During the first week of school, classroom teachers were given a list of students who qualified for special services because they were previously identified as having a learning disability. Teachers were also provided a list of students who were going to be tested to determine their eligibility in the gifted education program based on their previous year's California Achievement Test scores. The

students who were tested for the gifted education program needed to score 80% or higher on the end-of-the-year reading tests for their current grade levels.

In addition to the brief meeting at the beginning of the school year, two half-day in-services sessions were scheduled during the second semester. The scheduled in-services sessions did not focus on the inclusion plan, but on the components of an inclusion model of instruction. The first in-service session was about multiple intelligences and individual learning styles. At second in-service session topics were differentiation and compacting, two teaching strategies that are commonly used with inclusion programs. Both of these training sessions provided many useful and practical teaching plans, but the inclusion plan being used by the school was never discussed.

The present study examines the perceptions of the participants of the study regarding the changes in the special education instruction. The focus of this study was to look at the process that the staff go through during a major change in policy at their school. With this as its focus, the study examined the role the teachers played in the decision of change, how they were prepared for the changes, and how they reacted to the changes.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of educators participating in mandatory inclusion of special education students. The study was conducted using a multiple-case study design. The setting for the study was a semi-rural small town elementary school with a student population of 340 and a certified staff of 25.

### Research Questions

The Grand Tour Question. What were the perceptions of elementary educators of their role in required inclusion of special education students in the regular education classroom?

Subquestion A. What were the perceptions of regular classroom educators of their role in required inclusion of special education students in the regular education classroom?

Subquestion B. What were the perceptions of special education educators of their role in required inclusion of special education students in the regular education classroom?

Subquestion C. What were the perceptions of school administrators regarding required inclusion of special education students in the regular education classroom?

### Definitions

Qualitative Study. A qualitative study is an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem in a natural setting, based on building a complex, holistic picture formed with words. The picture formed will report detailed views of the informants in the study (Creswell, 1995).

Inclusion. Inclusion is an educational model of instruction which integrates special education students in the regular education classroom instead of having special education students in a self-contained separate setting for part or all of the school day (Wilczenski, 1992). Students with disabilities learn together in the same environment as students without disabilities (Behrman, 1993). Students with disabilities who are placed in the

regular classroom become the regular teacher's responsibility along with the support and assistance of specialists (Wilczenski, 1992).

Special Education . Special Education can be defined as specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parent, to meet the unique needs of a child who is unable to perform effectively in the regular classroom due to a disability or their academic level. This includes instruction conducted in the classroom and all areas that the student's school activities encompass (I.D.E.A., 1997).

Perceptions. Perceptions are created through the process of obtaining knowledge through the senses that leads to the understanding of an experience and in turn allows one to form an intuitive judgment (Stoler, 1992).

Class-Within-A-Class. An inclusion model that is used in an effort to keep students of all abilities in the regular classroom. This model requires grouping students of similar abilities with a lead teacher for each group. The groups all meet at a different location within the regular classroom.

Delimitations and Limitations. This research will be confined to a multiple case study consisting of interviewing and meeting with 14 elementary educators and 2 administrators in a Midwest semi-rural, small town, public elementary school. The purpose of this study is to gather information on the perceptions of each teacher in regard to district mandated inclusion of special education students. The outcomes of this particular study will be unique to this situation. If the study were to be replicated, the similarity of the outcome is dependent on how the subsequent setting studied would match the setting studied in this particular study.

## CHAPTER II: PROCEDURE

A letter of intent was sent to all potential participants. The purpose of this letter was to inform the participants about the study and that this study was voluntary and presented no risk. Additional information was included as to the time line of the study and each participant's responsibility to the study. The letter informed the participants that by agreeing to participate in this study, they would be involved in at least one interview, with the possibility of being asked to continue in the study and participate in all three interviews. It clearly informed them that confidentiality will be maintained and all information divulged in the planned interviews throughout the study was to be used for this study only.

The school at which this study took place is located in a small town approximately 20 miles from a large metropolitan area. The school, which consists of a pre-kindergarten program, elementary school, middle school, and high school is the only school in the school district. The study was conducted with the elementary teachers. The school had been using a pull-out program of special education instruction for the students that were identified with learning disabilities, as well as students that had been identified as gifted and talented. Laura, a special education teacher, ran the school's primary Learning Center, which was the classroom where students in grades 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> with learning disabilities had their reading and math instruction. Terry was the other special education teacher who was in charge of the intermediate Learning Center for students in grades 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> who had learning disabilities. Terry also taught the students who were



identified as gifted and talented. Since she was only a half-time GATE (gifted and talented) teacher, she only did enrichment once a week for the gifted students.

Since the school was moving to an inclusion program, Laura and Terry no longer had students coming to their classrooms. Rather, they went into the students' regular classroom to teach them. In addition, Terry's job title changed to full time GATE teacher. A long-term substitute was hired for the intermediate special education position until a teacher was hired at the start of the second semester. With the new inclusion plan, the GATE curriculum changed its focus from enrichment to acceleration. Under the new plan, Terry taught one advanced reading group per grade level. Laura also taught one reading group per grade level, but she still taught the primary students who had been identified with learning disabilities.

Because there is more than one class at each grade level at Pine View Elementary and only two special education teachers, the class-with-a-class model was the inclusion model the school's administration decided to use. A class-within-a-class model is when students of varying abilities are served within their class, but are grouped according to ability. Each group has their own teacher guiding their lessons. It focuses on the physical aspect of inclusion by keeping all of the students in their classroom and having the teachers come to them instead of the students leaving to go to the teachers (King Sears, 1997).

The change to an inclusion plan not only created changes in the way Terry and Laura had been teaching, but it also affected the role of the regular classroom teachers. Since Terry and Laura would be coming into the classrooms to teach, reading times

needed to be scheduled throughout the entire school, without times overlapping. Terry and Laura would also need to determine which of the grade level classrooms they would teach in. For manageability purposes, it was decided that Terry would go into one grade level class to teach a small group of gifted students while Laura was in the other class teaching a small group of students with learning disabilities. The regular classroom teachers would teach the students who had not been identified as either learning disabled or gifted. Then the students would either stay in their homeroom and be taught by their classroom teacher or move between the two classrooms, according to the groups the students were to be in. This was a new experience for all of the teachers involved.

Organization issues such as tables, chairs, books and work-space needed to be addressed before the teachers could start teaching. Having another teacher in the classroom was not something that any of the teachers had ever had to plan for before. There was also a question as to what money, the special education funds or the regular education budget, would buy the books that the special education students would be using. While this was an administrator's decision, some teachers were concerned with this matter when they were gathering up text books and consumable books for their regular classroom students and could not find enough to start the year.

Many of the participants in the study, including Laura and Terry, were teachers with five or more years of teaching experience. Four of the participants could be considered veteran educators with 15 years or more in the educational field. Most of the participants had earned either a Master's Degree in an educational field or had obtained additional endorsements besides their elementary education degree. The fields in which

participants had continued their education in included early childhood, special education, gifted education, and technology. The participants shared this information in the interviews sessions.

The interview questions that the participants were asked pertained to their professional background, teaching experiences, and perceptions of the inclusion of special education students in the regular education classroom (see Appendix). The main goal of the data analysis was to discover and understand how the participants made sense of the experiences that happened in their school regarding the special education policy changes (Creswell, 1995).

#### The Sequence of Events

At the beginning of the 1998/1999 school year, an initial meeting was held by the researcher to explain what the research study was about and what the responsibilities of the participant would be. The participants who agreed to participate in the study consisted of eleven regular education classroom teachers, two special education teachers, and two school administrators. After the participants volunteered to participate in the study, an initial interview was held in order to find out more about the participants' backgrounds and views towards special education inclusion. The interviews were transcribed and the data generated was evaluated by me, the researcher, and by my Thesis Chairman. After the initial interviews were held, six of the eleven classroom teachers who volunteered to participate were selected to continue with the study.

The second round of interviews was planned to coincide with the middle of the 1998/1999 school year. Only six regular education teachers and the two special

education teacher were interviewed for a second time. The interviews were transcribed and the data generated was once again evaluated by me, the researcher, and by my Thesis Chairman. Data from the initial interviews were compared with the data from the second interviews and emerging themes developed. A member check was done at this point to allow participants to verify that the information condensed from the interviews was accurate.

The final round of interviews was held during the last two weeks of the 1998/1999 school year. All of the research study participants took part in an individual exit interview. The participants consisted of the six regular education teachers, two special education teachers and the two school administrators. The interviews were transcribed and the data generated was evaluated by me, the researcher, and by my Thesis Chairman.

#### Type of Design Used

The study that I conducted was a multi-case descriptive study. Case studies involve the researcher exploring phenomenon and collecting detailed information by using various data collection procedures during a sustained period of time. In a case study there is a search for patterns developed by comparing data with patterns predicted from theory or literature. Case studies can also be explanation building in which the researcher looks for links and explores possible explanations about the case (Creswell, 1994.) I choose to use a case study design because it would best capture the perceptions of the participants and give the readers adequate information about the participants to create a real life context for this study.

In this multiple case study, I was concerned with gathering data from the informants in their natural environment while they experience the phenomenon under study. All of the data gathered concerned participants' experiences in the natural setting over an eight-month period. The perspectives of the participants and the researcher provided the necessary data for this study. As part of this multiple case study, I was looking for related data that developed patterns as the study progresses. These related data patterns represented a pattern of interconnected thoughts between the participants and helped the reader to connect to the experiences that the participants were having (Creswell, 1994).

#### Rationale for a Qualitative Design

There are numerous reasons why I choose to take a qualitative approach to this study:

\*The inclusion of special education students is a process that evolves over an extended length of time. The processes that take place and the patterns that emerge may be perceived differently by each participant. I only wished to observe and describe these perceptions, not to change, limit, control, or manipulate them in any way. In order to record these perceptions as they grew and changed over the duration of this study, qualitative methods were the most appropriate means of conducting this study (Ary, 1990).

\*This study was designed to look at a complex problem, and through the use of the participants' and participant observer's words, create an end product that is a complex and holistic picture of the situation. In order to get a picture that is true to what the

participants were experiencing, it was necessary to observe them in their natural setting. This was extremely important because of the fact that their natural setting was a key element of the study. The school in which they taught was where the changes in the inclusion plan occurred and it was their reactions to these changes that I was interested in and wished to observe. By using a qualitative design, I was able to achieve this in a natural setting (Creswell, 1994).

\*The underlying goal of this study, to research the process the regular classroom teachers and special education teachers go through when implementing an inclusion program, was one that was fairly unexplored as far as current research available. There was research available regarding the effects of an inclusion program or why an inclusion program should be implemented, but very little research from a regular classroom teacher's viewpoint. Therefore, a need existed to explore the phenomena that occurred at the study site. The nature of this phenomena is not one that could be suitably measured quantitatively, so a qualitative study was used.

\*As a participant observer, I was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. I choose to participate in this study since I was a regular classroom teacher where the study took place. Like the other participants in the study, I was expected to work with the changes that occurred. Because of this, I had similar experiences as the other participants regarding the changes that occurred. Data was mediated through the researcher, which was consistent with the qualitative design (Creswell, 1994).

\*By using a multiple case study design, I, as the researcher, explored and gathered data on multiple realities. Each participant experienced and reported on a reality and

although the participants were all experiencing the same phenomena, their perception of their reality may have differed from that of another participant. The qualitative methodology lends itself to the belief that multiple realities do exist, and therefore, it was the design that best fit my study (Creswell, 1994).

### The Role of the Researcher

My role was that of a participant and an observer. As a participant, I was a peer of the study subjects. I am a classroom teacher at the study site and I was required to include special needs students in my classroom in the same manner as the classroom educator participants. I did the same planning and received the same in-service training as the study subjects. I observed by keeping a daily journal of my thoughts and perceptions. My journal role was two fold, as I recorded my views on inclusion as a regular education teacher and my viewpoints as the researcher conducting this study. The thoughts and perceptions that I recorded were about what I observed happening around me. I recorded information regarding the teachers' initial reactions to the changes and the concerns they expressed regarding the inclusion plan.

In addition to observing, I was also a participant. This also enabled me to write down my thoughts and feeling about what was happening to me as I went through the changes in my classroom. I wrote about the confusion I had as we entered into a new school year and feeling unprepared. I included how worried I was about meeting the needs of my students or even know if their needs were being met since I was not working with all of my students on all of our daily subject areas. I wrote about my feelings of excitement in trying something new and hoping that the plan would be

successful. I also discussed how I was ready for the process of change to be over with and the longing for a familiar routine to set in. The journal was kept over an eight-month period, which was the duration of the school year. I used the data generated from my journal as a means of checking for any biases that I may have had that might have affected my ability to accurately filter through the data generated from the participant interviews.

### Method of Subject Selection

Subjects were selected by a sample of convenience. Two regular education teachers were randomly selected from each grade level to participate in the first interview of the study. The two elementary special education teachers, Laura and Terry, the one elementary principal, Kevin, and the one special education coordinator, Larry, were also selected to participate over the entire duration of the study.

The participants of the study were interviewed at the beginning of the school year. Of the participants who were regular classroom teachers, six were selected to continue in the study and be interviewed two more times during the school year, once in January, and once for a final interview in April. The participants in the initial interviews had mixed feelings about the inclusion changes and their role in the change process. The six classroom teachers who were selected for the additional interviews were chosen because in the initial interviews they appeared to be on opposite ends of a spectrum based on high willingness to participate and low willingness to participate with the new inclusion program. The participants that demonstrated a high willingness to participate in the new inclusion program were Ellen, Brenda, and Sarah. The participants that demonstrated a



low willingness to participate in the inclusion program were Gina, Mark, and Jane.

Laura and Terry, the two special education teachers were interviewed three times, but the administrators participating in the study, Kevin and Larry, were interviewed only at the initial and exit interviews.

### Data Collection Procedures

After meeting with the participants to inform them of the study design and time line, audio taped interviews were held with each participant. These were semi-structured interviews from a prepared list of questions, but further questions were asked for clarification purposes. The initial interview consisted of questions dealing with participant's professional background and training. Questions were also asked regarding classroom make-up and structure, including the number of students, the number of students that received special services, and the educators' perceptions on how the school year began for the class. Questions were also asked regarding the participants' views of inclusion. Administrators were asked similar questions, but referring to the school wide population.

A second round of interviews was conducted mid-way through the school year. The questions asked were semi-structured and based on data compiled from the initial interviews. After reviewing the transcripts from the initial interviews, I had was able to form questions. Further questions were asked for clarification and depth when I felt that the participant could elaborate on the topic or provide more information regarding the question that was asked or if I needed to make the question clearer. Only the selected regular education and special education teachers participated in the second interview.

At the end of the eight-month period, a final exit interview took place. The questions were again semi-structured, based on data collected from the first two interviews. Once again, further questions were asked for clarification and depth when I deemed it necessary to help make the information being shared clearer and easier to understand to both the participant and the researcher. The selected regular education, special education teachers, and administrators all participated in the final interview.

As mentioned previously, throughout the eight-month period of the study, I, as a participant observer, kept a journal. The journal provided data about my personal reflections, my observations, and my perceptions toward the phenomenon being explored. The journal was a record of my views, both as an informant and as the researcher. Entries were made on a regular basis during each school week. They were also made after each interview session and after reviewing the transcripts from the interviews.

### Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection and interpretation. Data was analyzed through a decontextualization process that allowed me to look for similarities within the data and develop themes. Data was then analyzed using a recontextualization process where these themes were reassembled into larger units of meaning. When reading through the transcribed interviews, I looked for similarities and connections within the data and for themes developing. It was these themes that helped to identify patterns (Creswell, 1994).

### Methods of Verification

In the attempt to keep my study valid, I utilized various verification procedures.

\*I, as the primary data gatherer, acted as the prime filter and interpreter and used my own journal as a means to be aware of my own biases and thoughts that might affect the accuracy of my analysis of the data. I also used my Thesis Chair to act as a secondary filter to help confirm the patterns that I saw emerging.

\*Transcripts were made of all of the participant's interviews. After reviewing the transcripts, data compiled from the transcripts was shared with the participants as member checks to verify the validity of my interpretations.

\*Data was gathered over a prolonged period of time where the researcher is consistently present. This allowed for a trust to be built up and maintained, which in turn helped to strengthen the validity of the data gathered.

\*Thick description was used when reporting the findings of this study. The participants and setting were described in such a way that the reader would be able to make an accurate judgment as to whether the findings of the study may or may not be similar in other situations.

### CHAPTER III: FINDINGS

It is important to consider many different issues when reporting on the findings of this study. The participants in this study had just experienced a major change of a school wide plan that affected all of them and their students. Many of these teachers were teachers with five or more years experience. The years of experience that a teacher has, along with a set plan of teaching can create a comfort zone for that individual teacher. Anytime something new is introduced into a setting, there usually is an adjustment period along with reaction to the changes occurring. This is true for the teachers, as well as the students. The process of inclusion is time consuming and often overwhelming for teachers and administrators. But there are certain things that schools can do to help offset some of the stress that is involved when such a major change occurs. Administrative support, in-service and training, communication, time allotments, and follow-up are all things that a school can do to help ease the tension and help to make a change go smoothly (Chalmers, 1993).

#### The Participants

Larry. Larry is one of the two administrators who participated in this study. Larry is the Director of Special Services at Oaktown Public Schools and also the school psychologist. His job is to supervise all the special education programs, the gifted and talented program, do student evaluations, and perform other basic administrator duties. He has been in education for 28 years. He has earned a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education, a Master's degree in Early Childhood and a Specialist's degree in School

Psychology. He is also endorsed in Counseling K-12 and Elementary Administration.

His interest in the educational field stemmed from his desire to work with people.

I guess I just realized that people are the resource in life that is most important to me. When I graduated from high school...I just found I wasn't interested in working with things, I was interested in working with people and so I gravitated to...education. (Larry, Initial Interview, 10/98).

When I asked Larry to share his views of inclusion he responded with,

I define inclusion as all children being included and served with the general education classroom. My feeling is that it's imperative to all children to be educated with their peers and Inclusion to me, I guess, is more that just having them in there but...to me the word ...embrace is important because it says more that that the child is in the room, it says there is a warm acceptance of all children within that classroom...to me that's a critical piece, that they're all accepted and included. (Larry, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Although he felt that the change to inclusion had gone smoothly this year, Larry realized that change is difficult for many people and there are barriers that need to be overcome.

I think resistance to change on the part of some people is one barrier. I think that philosophical differences is another barrier. Any change is difficult not only for students, some staff, but also for some parents. I think children are more resilient than adults and they can adapt... (Larry, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Overall, despite the barriers that need to be overcome, Larry felt that the changes made this year were positive ones. The changes were helping to ensure that every child was getting their needs met.

I think that it's been a real positive change in Pine View. I think that it'll be even more positive as I get the word out to staff, for example, I think that staff didn't realize that you can move from group to group without being verified Special Ed, you can be in that group before being identified as a High Ability Learner and so I think it's given us a lot more flexibility to have every child at their level of instruction so that no child should be working at a level of frustration... (Larry, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Kevin. Kevin is the second administrator who participated in the study. He is the Elementary Principal at the Oaktown Public Schools. His responsibilities involve supervising the regular education teachers, the paraprofessionals, student discipline, and the daily functions required in running an elementary school. He has been in the field of education for nine years, the last three years as an administrator. Before becoming an elementary principal, he was an elementary teacher. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and a Master's degree in Curriculum Instruction. He also has a Special Education endorsement. At the time of the interview, he was taking classes in school administration. He went into the field of education because he liked working with people.

I guess growing up in high school and before then I also knew that I wanted to do something with people and primarily kids...and then once I started teaching I thought...I like teaching with students but I think I would also like the adult interaction and therefore I

went into administration... (Kevin, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Inclusion is a program that he supported, but feels it needs to be done properly, with guidance. He also cautioned that an inclusion program may not best meet the needs of all students.

My feeling toward inclusion regarding special needs students, I would say that I'm all for that as long as it is done properly and what I mean by that is if somebody is working at maybe a slightly lower level... I think they [specialists] should come to the classroom and work with those students ... I guess I draw the line when the students would get to the point where they are embarrassed because they are two or three years behind... where they might need more of a pull out program or separate place to do more intense work with more time one on one... (Kevin, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Although the school year had just begun, Kevin felt that the teachers have been working well and adjusting to the changes that were required when the school switched from a pull out model or special education instruction to a inclusion model.

... Any time change is introduced they're (the teachers) are going to have a difficult time with it. As you know, some are more receptive to change than others, but I think overall... they're putting the best foot forward in most cases as far as giving it a try and seeing the benefits but also identifying some modification that they would like to see and we'll probably be working on that throughout this year as far as ironing out all the kinks. (Kevin, Initial Interview, 10/98).

His main concerns regarding inclusion were that all of the teachers give it a try and to keep the children in focus as the most important issue.

The main concerns regarding inclusion... the main concerns for me anyway is that some are not going to want to jump on board and give it a try as much as the next person and so therefore some might be drug along... we have to work hard to make sure that everybody buys into the same philosophy that this is what's best for the kids, and give it a try to see if it is effective and is it's not how can we make it effective. (Kevin, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Terry. Terry is an elementary teacher with seven years of teaching experience. She works in the area of special education and gifted education. She teaches gifted education using a class-within-a-class model with most grade levels.

This is my seventh year (teaching) and I've worked with several different grade levels, ages, and areas. I initially I went into whole classrooms for first, second, and third (grade) to teach thinking skills, did pull out for fourth fifth and sixth, identified gifted students and also did fifth and sixth special ed. This year I'm down to going into the whole classroom for first through sixth grade just focusing on the identified gifted students. (Terry, Initial Interview 9/98).

She has a degree in elementary education with endorsements in special education and gifted education endorsement. She is not currently taking any classes. She became interested in the field of education by working with adults with special needs.

...I've always liked to work with kids, of course I think all teachers do. Initially I really felt that our special education population was one that had been ignored and sort of mistreated over the years and I thought that... if I could help some kids reach their potential that would be a good thing so I started working with mentally handicapped adults and then that fueled the fire and then eventually went into special education. Now even though I really enjoy working with special ed kids... I really like to focus on



the gifted kids. I think it's my niche. (Terry, Initial interview, 9/98).

One of her jobs at her school, along with teaching the gifted education students, was to help identify the students who qualify for gifted education. She did this with through teacher recommendation, parent input, grades, and some testing.

...at our school I think it's no so much identifying gifted students as it is just identifying even high ability students...if you tested them with the Stanford Binet or the WISC-R...you are going to find that maybe they don't fall in the gifted range for IQ but they perform in the classroom in reading or in math at an advanced level...I do have a couple of kids that not only I think are gifted but...that are highly gifted and they require a lot more timer and a lot more expertise. (Terry, Initial Interview, 9/98).

In order to help her with the caseload of gifted education students, she has a paraprofessional that helps her.

I have a paraprofessional that helps me, um, everyday second and third grade reading ...are at the same time. So when I'm in one class, the other class is covered by a paraprofessional... she doesn't teach any new skills to the kids but she does follow up so she needs to have a copy of my plan every week and I plan for what she is going to do making sure that she's not teaching skills... Then she does math enrichment groups, she has three that she takes care of...she meets with them...three times a week, sometimes it's two times. (Terry, Initial Interview, 9/98).

Ellen. Ellen has been teaching at the primary elementary grades for six years. She has taught Kindergarten, second grade, and is currently teaching first grade. She has a

Bachelors degree in Early Childhood/Elementary Education. She was very open about her teaching strengths and areas in need of improvement.

I think one of my strengths is that I'm very flexible and organized and I have a caring personality. Some areas I would like to improve in maybe are communication with parents and other teachers, being able to communicate better and having the time to do that would be nice. (Ellen, Initial Interview, 9/98).

Although she only had one student who was using the inclusion model, Ellen felt it had been an effective and positive experience for the all of the people involved.

It's worked really well...when the para comes in to work with my LC (learning center) kid, she's able to do what the group is doing with a little support from her para and she has really made a lot of progress...and she's with the group and not being isolated, I like that...It has been very positive for me.(Ellen, Initial Interview, 9/98).

Brenda. Brenda has been teaching for two years. She previously taught fifth grade and is currently teaching fourth grade. She has a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education K-6 and Special Education Mild and Moderate K-9. She entered the teaching field because of family influence and her love of children.

...Both of my parents are teachers so I kind of grew up in a house where education was really important, so I just got interested in that. Just kind of a desire to want to be around kids and to watch them grow. (Brenda, Initial Interview, 9/98).

Brenda felt that her strengths are what make her a good educator.

Some of my strengths are that I can be patient, I have a lot of energy to work with the students, I'm creative,

I use my time wisely both in my planning time as well as what I can manage to give my students without overwhelming them, without wasting time with them. (Brenda, Initial Interview 9/98).

One of the difficulties that she had experienced with the changes in the special education policy was teaching using the class-within-a-class model.

It's been difficult just trying to get used to having another teacher in my classroom, it's sometimes very frustrating, I'll be trying to teach a lesson and the students in the back are real excited about their learning and I can't hear my students or vice versa. I know there are times that we've gotten real excited and we cheer about something and all of a sudden I realize, oh, there are eight people in the back of my room trying to work. (Brenda, Initial Interview, 9/98).

Although she has had a few difficulties adjusting to the changes this year, Brenda did feel that by starting the inclusion program, the school had taken a step in the right direction.

I think my concern is that people try it and they stick to it long enough so that it doesn't just fizzle away and they say, well, we tried it. It's got to take a few years. I think there need to be some changes, but this is our learning year and people need to remember that and to stick with that and changes will constantly need to be made but ... I think it's a great idea. I think it could work. (Brenda, Initial Interview, 9/98).

Sarah. Sarah has been teaching at the elementary level for 18 years and has taught at many different grade levels. She is currently teaching at the fifth grade. She has just completed her Master's degree in Technology and Education. She feels her training has played a large role in her effectiveness as a teacher.

Basically I had a Bachelor of Science Degree... and had taken several classes that I felt I had a need for. I taught in a rural school setting for several years and whenever I had a special needs child either on the gifted end or the special ed end, I tried to prepare myself by picking up college classes to help me out there. (Sarah, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Sarah felt that the training she received by teaching in a multi-grade rural school helped prepare her for dealing with diversity within her own classroom.

... I guess I have that advantage because I have taught several different grade levels... I don't think that a lot of teachers have had that background and that experience so when a special needs student comes in they feel a great loss but I feel fairly successful with my background dealing with special needs students. (Sarah, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Sarah saw inclusion as a process that will involve all aspects of a school.

I think inclusion is philosophically a wonderful idea, but it has to be an ongoing educational experience for the teachers, the students, the parents, everybody involved. It can't just be... an administration or a certain person's decision and then thrust upon everyone else. Everybody needs to be involved in the process, the decision making and the education part of it. (Sarah, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Gina. Gina is an elementary teacher who has been teaching for eleven years.

During her teaching career, she has taught at the fourth, fifth and sixth grade level. She is currently teaching sixth grade. Her training is a mix from her educational background and her previous teaching experiences. She is continuing her education by working on her Master's degree in Education.

I received my Bachelors Degree... and I have attended... various workshops on Cooperative Learning. I'm working on my Master's in Educational Technology and I taught on the Indian Reservation which I think gave me valuable teaching lessons. (Gina, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Gina was confident in her teaching abilities and strengths. She felt that being an effective teaching involves more than just teaching a lesson.

I feel that I have a pretty good rapport with the students, but they know also that there is a boundary between the student/teacher relationship, that I am still their teacher and I'm an adult and they can confide in me, but they also know that there will be a consequence to anything they do and I will hold them accountable because I am an adult, I won't be their friend all the time. I push myself to teach to all the learning modalities in everything I do, just to reach every student. I think they need to feel good about themselves to be affective learners and so (I) try to...build them up all you can. (Gina, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Although she was confident in her teaching abilities, Gina did not feel that she was trained to work with students with special needs.

When I went to college I had, well in my mind, I had two choices. I could be Special Ed or regular

Elementary Ed. I choose Elementary Ed, that's where I feel comfortable, that's where I want to be and I'm not trained to work with a Special Ed student. I can make adaptations, but unless I have (a) trained Special Ed instructor planning with me, along side me, cooperatively, gladly, then I, in no way, am equipped to meet the needs or understand the needs of a Special Ed students on either end of the spectrum. (Gina, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Gina was not sure of the best way to meet students needs, but she felt it needs to be a mix of different tools and strategies.

I don't know what model, what method, what strategy is best for any group of students. I just know that all students are individual and you have to look at what will best meet the needs of the students...I think as educators we should all have a say in what we think will work best because we are the ones in the trenches everyday and we see the students and we should have some flexibility in the system, we should not be mandated because then you get resentment and then there is no cooperation...there needs to be more planning time between special teachers...and homeroom teachers...it should not be a separate entity, they should be working together, that's not happening and everyone seems to be on their own page and not on the same page (Gina, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Mark. Mark has been teaching for 30 years. During his teaching career he has taught at all grades levels from fifth grade to tenth grade. He is currently teaching sixth grade. When he taught at the middle and high school grades, his specialty areas were math and science. He has a

Master's degree in the area of Elementary Education. His experience in Boy Scouts was one of the factors that made him choose teaching as a career.

One of the key was as I was growing up I worked in the Boy Scouts and found that I could get along with kids well and associated well and they seemed to like doing fun things and so it was a background I had in Boy Scouts that slanted me towards this... (Mark, Initial Interview, 10/98).

He felt that one of his greatest strengths as a teacher was his love for his job.

When asked to describe his strengths, he responded by saying,

Loving to work with kids, loving to come to work in the morning and the variety that comes with each day, the variety of parents and the variety of kids and just the action that takes place during the day, never boring. (Mark, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Although he had a positive opinion regarding inclusion, Mark did not feel that the current program was true to his own personal and professional belief of what inclusion is.

...as far as my belief on inclusion ...the term itself 'inclusion' is to include... if we don't include everyone with the same educational foundation then it's different, it's not inclusion anymore, so I just feel that we have some kids in one reading book and some kids in another reading book, that alone is not inclusion because it is a separate curriculum totally and for inclusion to be truly inclusion, the kids both have the same curriculum. (Mark, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Laura. Laura has been working in the field of elementary education for 19 years, working with students who range from Kindergarten to fourth grade. She has worked as

a regular education teacher and a special education teacher. She is currently a special education teacher. She has a Master's degree in Special Education Learning Disabilities. Her current caseload consisted mainly of students with learning disabilities, but she has had more challenging caseloads in the past few years.

Right now the majority of my caseload is just learning disabilities. Although I've had a couple of MMH (mild/moderate mentally handicapped) students. In the past it has been difficult because I've had MMH students... other health impaired learning disabilities on top of everything... it can be tough. (Laura, Initial Interview, 10/98).

In previous years, she has done a pull-out program, but this year the special education program has changed. This has caused her to make some adjustment to her teaching style.

I go into the classroom as class-within-a-class and then sometimes if the group is too big for a class-within-a-class in the classroom, then we go back into my room, so it kind of varies this year. But normally in the past eight years that I have been teaching here... they come to me... I definitely think that I would feel more comfortable in my room... I feel that sometimes I'm restricted to a small area in the back or on the side or in the front wherever we go and it's no fault of anybody, it's just the way it is... I feel sometimes that kind of disables me as a teacher. (Laura, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Although she has had to make adjustments this year, she felt that inclusion was something that is worthwhile and can work.

I think it (inclusion) can work and I've always said this, I think it can work, the inclusion can work with the high functioning LD (learning disabled) kids,



those that are almost borderline. I think inclusion is wonderful for those kids who are pretty much on grade level. It is the kids who are not on grade level that are like two years behind or even one year behind...it's really difficult then. But they should be included as much as possible in the other curriculum areas and be made to do Social Studies and Science... (Laura, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Jane. Jane has been teaching for six years. In those six years she has taught Kindergarten, full day Kindergarten, elementary physical education, and is currently teaching third grade. She has also subbed for all grade levels Kindergarten through High School. Her degree is in Elementary Education and she is currently taking classes to further her education. She went into teaching because of personal experiences when she was a student.

I was not a great student myself and I saw how a teacher, you know, how different teachers taught me and how they motivated me and ... because I love other children I wanted to make sure that they were motivated and had the best chance to learn that they could. (Jane, Initial Interview, 9/98).

One of the challenges that she faced this year was her scheduling due to the changes in the special education policy at her school. Although the policy had changed to an inclusion model, she still had students leaving her room during the day.

I would say a good 50% of my class comes and goes during the day. I think it's crazy...I have my schedule on my desk at all times because there are so many times to remember that...there is no way that I can remember all of those time and there's times it changes on a day to day basis...the kids can't even remember the times when they need to come and go because some of the kids are leaving two or three or four times a day. (Jane, Initial Interview, 9/98).

She felt that the changes in the special education policy were good and were much needed, but there were still issues that need to be addressed.

I think that the inclusion program overall can be really good...if it's handled the correct way but... I personally think that [we] need a lot more experience with it and training... it's going to take a supervisor/administrator who knows what they're doing to...get it going with all the other teachers. It's capable of becoming a good program but it needs to be done correctly. (Jane, Initial Interview, 9/98).

The Researcher. I am an elementary teacher who is currently teaching 3rd grade. In the past I have also taught Kindergarten and 1st grade. I have an elementary teaching degree with an early childhood endorsement. I am currently working on my master's degree in elementary education, with the emphasis on early childhood education.

### The Process

Throughout the duration of this research study, I held a dual role as participant and observer. My role of participant existed solely because I was employed at the site of the research study and I was being exposed to the same experiences as the research participants. I was involved with the changes that they were experiencing due to the changes in the special education policy at the school. As researcher it was also my role to be able to step back and observe the changes that were taking place as the school year progressed. A journal helped my to separate my roles and collect data effectively.

### Length of Study

This research study took place over a period of ten months, the duration of the school year. During this time period, teachers' perceptions of special education inclusion were recorded and analyzed through an interview process which consisted of 3 interviews. The natural end point of this study was the ending of the school year. The interviewees ended their participation in the study with a final exit interview conducted the final three weeks of the ten-month period.

### Emergent Themes

Data was evaluated and analyzed by sorting it into categories and looking for the emergence of themes and patterns. As stated earlier, I acted as primary filter and my Thesis Chair acted as a secondary filter to review the finding of the data and to confirm the themes that had been identified. These themes were then presented to the participants via a member check (Creswell, 1997; Ely et al. 1993; Miles and Huberman, 1994) for verification. By signing the member checks, the participants agreed that my interpretations were accurate and credible, as well as matched their perceptions of the process. After receiving the participants' written verification, the data was then reduced in order to extract and compare the emerging themes. When looking at the data, I tried to find references to similar experiences that were shared by the participants. I looked at the information they had shared in the interviews and tried to find connections in the data. After looking at the data, it became apparent that there were certain issues that had developed into themes.

## Themes

The following themes emerged when reviewing the information shared by the participants in their interviews. Analysis of the data revealed five themes:

- I. Definition of Inclusion: which included the participants' understanding and views on inclusion;
- II. Training: which included college, graduate classes, staff meetings, and school in-service sessions;
- III. Reaction to Change: which included participants' thoughts and experiences regarding the school wide change to inclusion;
- IV. Communication: which included communication issues between staff, students, parents, and administration;
- V. Administrative Support: which included assistance provided directly by the administration.

While not all of the themes may be common to all of the participants, the themes were common to the majority of them.

### “What Exactly Are We Talking About?”: The Definition of Inclusion

I didn't know there were so many different definitions...so many different ways to do inclusion (Mark, Final Interview, 5/99).

An important element of effective inclusion is that staff members have a shared understanding and belief in inclusion (Malarz, 1996). While most of the participants shared a definition of the term inclusion, not all of the participants had the same

understanding of inclusion. After reviewing the responses, two common ideas could be seen. Some participants defined inclusion mainly as all the students being the same classroom.

Inclusion the way I see it is basically any one of several techniques to make sure that students are included in the classroom and the regular classroom curriculum as much as possible...while making some adjustments either higher or lower for those student's abilities (Terry, Second Interview, 2/99).

...my idea of inclusion would be where that students are served inside the classroom, they may not be...academically on the same level as all their peers, but they cover the same materials...(Sarah, Second Interview, 2/99).

Inclusion means to me that everybody participates in the classroom whether they have a learning disability, whether they are in the slow learner range or low average range...you are included in what we are doing with modifications and adaptations. (Laura, Second Interview, 2/99).

I feel true inclusion is when all of the students within the class are working on a certain topic, however, there are different levels of that topic that the kids are working on. Some of the kids will be working at more advances, some of the kids will be working on ... the same topic but easier work for that topic. (Jane, Second Interview, 2/99).

These participants felt that the materials that the students were studying may have been tied in to whether or not they were practicing inclusion. They discussed that the students may or may not be working on the same topics and materials, but curriculum was not the primary focus of their definition of inclusion. It was that the students were in the classroom. The following participants expressed this in a more direct manner.

It (inclusion) is having students being served in a regular classroom with students of all levels... (Brenda, Second Interview, 2/99).

I define inclusion as all children being included and served within the general education classroom (Larry, Initial Interview, 10/98).

The other participants stated specifically that in order for a plan to be inclusion, the same curriculum had to be followed.

Inclusion would imply that there's no pull out that... somehow the given curriculum is diversified to meet the needs of various populations within a room so they are included in instruction as set by the curriculum. I don't feel we have followed what I perceive to be the definition of inclusion. Instead we have grouped and try to meet the needs that way... (Gina, Second Interview, 2/99).

Inclusion entails involving a students that is lower ability in the same curriculum that all the other students are doing and helping that student through... help with other teacher, help with a para maybe or modifying the curriculum so that they're able to do work on their level. (Ellen, Second Interview, 2/99).

Inclusion is to include... for inclusion to be truly inclusion the kids both have the same curriculum (Mark, Second Interview, 2/99).

When implementing an inclusion program, it is crucial that all of people that will be implementing the plan know what the plan is (Barnhart, Huang, Mellblom, & Pearman, 1992). While each participant in the study had a definition for the term 'inclusion', not all of their definitions were the same. As stated previously, some participants focused on the physical aspect of having the students in the room, while

other felt inclusion extended from the physical aspect and included students having the same curriculum although modifications would need to be made. Some of the participants felt that the program being implemented was not inclusion as they understood it.

...inclusion as a whole is the term itself. Inclusion is to include and we don't include everyone with the same educational foundation, then it's different, it's not inclusion anymore... (Mark, Initial Interview 10/98).

...I don't feel we have followed what I perceive to be the definition of inclusion. Instead we have grouped and try to meet needs that way, not that that's necessarily bad or good, but to call it inclusion doesn't really set what my perspective of inclusion is and my perspective might be wrong. But what I see inclusion to be does not fit exactly what our plan did this year (Gina, Initial Interview 10/98).

...it kind of seems to me that we're still pulling students out of my classroom to go. There are still two kids that are leaving to go to another classroom. They are still in a regular classroom, but they still have to leave so they're still making them stand out (Brenda, Second Interview, 2/99).

Inclusion implies to me a team-teach sort of approach where they (students) are included in the regular curriculum with some enhancement in a team teaching situation...inclusion to me doesn't imply pull-out which obviously this was. I did not have contact with my homeroom students for reading the entire year and...that is a little hard to conference with parents about their progress in reading when you have had zero contact in an inclusion program...there's a few concerns there (Gina, Final Interview, 5/99).

While a single definition of inclusion is elusive, some felt that it is easier to define inclusion by communicating what inclusion is not. By eliminating practices that are clearly not inclusion, one can get a clearer picture of what inclusion really is (Behrmann, 1993). Communication between all parties involved is key to the success of program (Malarz, 1996). One very important element in making a new program work is to make sure that all people involved have a clear understanding of the goal and the crucial parts needed to reach that goal (Stoler, 1992). Not all of the participants in this study even had the same definition of inclusion and some were confused as to whether or not they were even doing inclusion.

#### “Are We Ready?”: Training

Many of the participants shared similar concerns about not having adequate training before starting the new program. Some felt that they had little or no training at all.

We were just basically told by the administrator who was putting the program together that this is what it is and you need to do it with no instruction on how to do it or even needed information about on you know, how to do it. (Jane, Second Interview, 2/99).

...we had little to no training in the Special Ed area, I think this was basically dropped in our laps and we were pretty much told...that we were going to have to deal with it this was...I think that caught a lot of people off guard (Sarah, Second Interview, 2/99).

Other participants felt that they were unprepared and needed more training than they were given.



I was a little worried at the beginning of the year because I don't feel that we were really prepared..." "I think a lot of teachers were in the dark at the beginning of the year... (Terry, Second Interview, 2/99).

I think if the teachers had been given training ahead of time and maybe explained what was going to happen instead of just having it shoved on us... I don't mean to sound so negative but, um, I just think it could have been handled better by the administration. (Jane, Second Interview, 2/99).

I think maybe we should have had more in-services on it, what is expected, which kids would be best for the program, because there are some teacher that aren't using it that probably should be. (Ellen, Second Interview, 2/99).

Although some participants were reflecting back to before they started the inclusion program, one participant expressed the need for training as the program was developing. They felt that ongoing in-services would help them to reflect on the program and have a clear understanding of the program's goal.

I think we really need to have a meeting to say this is what's going to happen, are you in agreement with this, umm, if you don't feel comfortable doing this (inclusion), give us your reason... maybe some in-services about it. (Laura, Second Interview, 2/99).

A couple of the participants were not entirely sure of the amount of training, although they were the administrators involved in providing the training.

I don't know that there was a lot of training in this first go around. I think we had a couple of meeting and I explained to the staff the direction we were moving and tried to deal with any resistance then... (Larry, Initial Interview, 10/98).

We have met a couple of times as far as at the beginning of the year... and I do believe, if I remember right, that we met at the end of last year... (Kevin, Initial Interview, 10/98).

While there were differing opinions among the participants, the general feeling conveyed was that training was important and they did not feel that they had received an adequate amount of training and information regarding the program.

I think it takes awhile to build it (the program) up and it takes patience and it takes everybody working together... we're just lacking in the training of it. (Brenda, Second Interview, 2/99).

I think the areas that need work are more... in-service or training for teachers who are not comfortable. I'm fortunate enough that I have a Special Ed degree so... I fell comfortable doing whatever. There are teachers who don't and I don't think it's fair to them to say... the whole class is going to be here and the resource teacher will just come in and help (Brenda, Final Interview, 5/99).

The participants did not seem very sure about the number of in-service sessions and meetings that took place when implementing the new inclusion plan. During the implementation of a new program, there is little doubt that there will need to be some training available to prepare the people involved with the change (Malarz, 1996).

When discussing training with the participants, it was clear that the majority of them felt that there was not adequate training provided before the change in the school inclusion plan took place. Many of the participants did not feel that they had been trained, but just rather informed of the upcoming changes. Some teachers felt that they

were not only inadequately prepared for the changes, but that they were not involved in the planning of the changes.

I don't think we were formally informed of this (inclusion) until school started maybe an in service at the first week of school, maybe five days before students got here...it was a telling, this is the way it will be situation which is never productive or positive (Gina, Second Interview, 2/99).

Last spring they told us we were going to be doing inclusion differently with not really giving a direction as to how... and during the summer nothing exceptional was done and we came back in the fall, had a little workshop where they basically said this is the way it's going to be. It's officially a top down philosophy... (Mark, Second Interview, 2/99).

While all of the teachers in the study were trained and experienced teachers, they were not prepared for the changes that occurred in their school. The need for training was something that the participants realized and they felt training was an important factor in making the transition go smoothly. The administration must provide the staff development needed to make the staff familiar with the upcoming changes (Powell & Hyle, 1997). They also need to support the staff until they are at a point where they feel comfortable with the innovation and confident that they are competent to carry out the plan successfully (Powell and Hyle, 1997).

...it is really important to... know what you're doing before you start the program... get everything laid out ahead of time, let the staff know what their responsibilities are and make sure they have the supporting staff to make the program work (Jane, Final Interview, 5/99).

When asked about how they viewed the inclusion plan and the future of the program, some of the participants replied that they would like to see the program continue, but with more staff involvement, more communication, and more training.

I would like to see this program continue through next year, but I really feel the administration needs to figure out what their goals are and... talk to the staff or communicate with the staff and be able to let us have input to really work things out (Jane, Second Interview, 2/99).

Some were not sure of how they felt about continuing the program. They felt that the teachers had to put too much of themselves into the plan to make it work.

...they (teachers) felt like they didn't have any input on it (inclusion), they didn't have any say in it, it was just here this is what you are going to do and... they didn't think they were consulted or anything like that... I think that was a major concern." (Sarah, Second Interview, 2/99).

...I'm fairly comfortable with what we do with Inclusion, but I feel that a lot of teachers... felt at a loss... they felt like they didn't have any input on it, they didn't have any say in it. It was just 'Here, this is what you are going to do.' They didn't think they were consulted... that was a major concern (Sarah, Final Interview, 5/99).

One participant believed in the theory behind the program, but felt it was not carried out in an effective manner.

I was a little disappointed with the program. I felt like it could potentially have been a great program if people would have been a little bit more willing to work together. I felt like some of the teachers at our school really did a great job. We pulled together and we made the best that we could, but the Gate teacher

and the Special Ed Director weren't, in my opinion, willing to work with the classroom teachers (Jane, Final Interview, 5/99).

Although the participants were given the opportunity to express concerns regarding the inclusion plan, some felt that the opportunity came too late in the program. One participant wondered why it took an entire school year before they were able to voice their concerns.

...we were given a questionnaire at the end of the year...and then those results were tabulated...I think the Special Ed Coordinator...has tried to look at...what our feelings are and...given us more latitude in what to do with the program. I'm just wondering why that latitude wasn't given in the first year... (Gina, Final Interview, 5/99).

The following participant shared his ideas of what he would do in order to make the program more successful for the following year.

Well, the administrators carry the final decision as administrators, but I think as the teachers that have to make the idea work, we simply need to...call a meeting and sit down and say '...I like this and I didn't like this and what can we do to change it?'...Come up with some recommendations for the administration and for the administration to be open minded and to listen to this because we are the ones who are digging the trenches...It's a good staff here so I think it can be worked out (Mark, Second Interview, 2/99).

I would form a small committee of at least one teacher from each grade level and then go through what my definition (of inclusion) was and go through what other definitions are, what I saw worked and (was) successful... and what wasn't successful (Mark, Final Interview, 5/99).

Teachers need to be empowered and recognized as leadership personnel if the implementation of new ideas and changes are to be successful (Stoler, 1992). No one knows the students better than the teachers. There is no one who knows the circumstances of the teacher better than the teacher (Greer, 1996). There also is no one knows what works in a classroom and doesn't work in a classroom better than the teacher inside of that classroom. If teachers are to be prepared for inclusion, and other changes, they must take ownership of that innovation (Ayers, 1992).

“How Are You Feeling?”: Reaction to Change.

Whenever you introduce change into an environment, there will be reaction to the change. The school inclusion plan, the source of the change, brought new issues to the regular classroom teachers. Implementing the process of teaching students with special needs requires a change in curriculum and teaching methods (Kochhar, 1996). Teacher attitude towards inclusion can be tied to the effectiveness of the program (Minke, 1996). There are new responsibilities and roles changes when a regular classroom teacher is working more closely with special needs students (Stoler, 1992). Many participants discussed the different reactions to change they observed and the issues that were factors with changing to an inclusion policy. Some discussed how they felt other teachers were reacting to the changes.

I think that it caught a lot of people off guard and I know there are a lot of teacher that do not feel that they have been adequately prepared to do this inclusion (Sarah, Initial Interview, 10/98).

A lot of the teachers really were resistant to losing the gifted kids in the classroom and to losing your best

students...I think there was a lot of resistance to changing...(Terry, Final Interview, 5/99).

Gina was very general about her reaction to the changes that had occurred and tied her feeling in with her perception of how the entire staff was reacting to the changes.

I think we are all struggling with it (inclusion) and still struggling to understand...how relative it is and how it is really actually benefiting students and how in fact is it benefiting all students and is it consistent in evaluating who belongs where..."(Gina, Second Interview, 2/99).

...it's wonderful that we have...programs for the learning disabled kids...because I was not trained specifically to meet their needs and I guess I'm not specifically trained to meet the needs of the identified Gate kids...I think that it's most beneficial for them to have an expert helping them because I can't provide them always what they need."(Gina, Second Interview, 2/99).

One participant, Laura, a special education teacher, discussed how they specifically reacted to the changes.

I would feel more comfortable in my room...I feel that sometimes I'm restricted to a small area...I feel sometimes that kind of disables me as a teacher."(Laura, Second Interview, 2/99).

...you have to work with the teacher and... you have to get your ideas known and sometimes that's hard because they are the classroom teacher and you don't want to step all over...feet so I think we're a little careful, we're a little kind of cautious and hesitant in that respect and I think that's going to be an ongoing problem.."(Laura, Second Interview, 2/99).

A couple of participants' reaction to the changes were of more of a personal nature. They felt that some personal issues were influencing the program and that made their reactions seem negative towards other staff members

I really think the problems stem from some control issues, some inflexibility issues, some structure issues and from my perspective I don't think the child's best interest was considered..."(Gina, Second Interview, 2/99).

I think that we have some people who are still so resistant to it (inclusion) and ...that really hurts the kids and it definitely hurt my feelings..."(Terry, Initial Interview, 10/98).

When the administrators were asked how the staff was dealing with the new program and the changes that had occurred, one administrator focused on the process that the teachers had to go through trying to implement the inclusion program.

I think overall most of the teacher grew in the process ... and have grown to try and take on some of the responsibility within their rooms...by saying...we're going to have to group the kids according to their level, whether we have a Gate teacher ...or a Learning Center teacher or not...and try to meet all the student's needs (Kevin, Final Interview 5/98).

The other administrator discussed how he felt the first year of the program went by sharing information about how the staff's attitudes towards the program changed from the beginning of the school year.

Well, in the beginning I felt like I had about 50% for and 50% anti and the lower grades were really workable and the upper grades weren't. By the end of the year I would guess we were more at 80/20. I think we still have some teachers that it's not what they



would choose to do if they could choose...but I was expecting 50% for and 50% against at the end of the year so I was very satisfied (Larry, Final Interview, 5/98).

Reaction to change is something that is difficult to measure (Olson, 1997).

People react and deal with change in so many different ways that it is difficult to attach a means of measurement to their actions. It was a topic that the participants were a little uncomfortable talking about. Some hesitated about how they had reacted to the changes that occurred, but they would freely discuss how they perceived other staff members had adjusted. This, in itself, is a reaction to change. It is the feeling of being uncomfortable in an unfamiliar environment. This was something that was apparent in the interviews.

“Is Anyone Listening?” : Communication

Communication between all of the staff members involved is a key component in making a school- wide reform, like the inclusion program, successful (Winter, 1996).

...communication is the key between all parties involved...make sure you're communicating...what goals you want the children to meet (Ellen, Final Interview, 5/99).

Communication can act as an adhesive that can help bring a program and staff together. When reflecting over the past year and the inclusion program, one of the school's administrators commented on how important communication is.

I would say you have to involve the teachers from the start...that was one of our biggest drawbacks that the teachers were kind of just told...that this is how the grant is written and this is how we need to start moving...I would say at any point if something is going to be successful you are going to have to be

committed to meeting on a regular basis to communicate and keep everyone on board... (Kevin, Final Interview, 5/98).

He also shared his views on how communication can help with the process of change.

Usually the people that are most opposed to change are the ones that feel uninformed and they will be the most resistant... (Kevin, Final Interview, 5/98).

Although communication is a factor that is realized to be crucial, finding the time to sit and discuss plans was not always available. This planning time was needed to effectively communicate with other teachers lesson plan, concerns, and the progress of the students (Olson, 1997). Some of the participants expressed the desire or need to have more planning time with the other teachers who were teaching their students. The plan time the individual teacher had was mostly sufficient, but at times it was difficult to find times when all of the involved staff members could meet. To compound this, the specialist teachers, Terry and Laura, often would have students scheduled during their planning times due to their heavy case loads. This forced them, as well as other teachers, to find time to plan before and after school, or at home.

...I don't get a lot of time to do the planning here at school, I do some of it and I end up taking it home over the weekend..."(Terry, Initial Interview, 10/98).

The participants realized how important communicating and collaborating with other staff members was, but didn't feel like they had an adequate amount of planning time to make that necessary communication happen.

It would be great if we could have more time to work with fellow teachers and do more collaboration...just more time to communicate with other teachers (Sarah, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Some areas I would like to improve in ...are communication with...other teachers, being able to communicate better and having the time to do that would be nice (Ellen, Initial Interview, 10/98).

I think we as a staff need more time... where I have plan time scheduled with the ...teacher that is serving my students with the various other teachers...having plan time is great but I need to be able to meet with the teachers that are also servicing my students. (Sarah, Second Interview, 2/99).

...there needs to be more planning time between special teachers, Special Ed teachers, and the homeroom teachers, it shouldn't be a separate entity, they should be working together, that's not happening and everyone seems to be on their own page and not on the same page.(Gina, Second Interview, 2/99).

This time that the participants felt they needed is an important factor in making an inclusion program effective (Wigle, 1997). Collaboration between teachers is a means of lending support, which is the next theme that emerged.

#### “Can I Get Some Help, Please?” : Administrative Support

Administrators are key to the success of an inclusion program (Powell & Hyle, 1997). Their support of all teachers, both the regular classroom and the special education, is crucial.

...administrative support ...is probably the most crucial part (Terry, Final Interview, 5/99).

It is the administration that makes the decision to allow for training and added time to develop a new program (Carnine, 1990). If the administration is committed to the process of inclusion, then it is more likely that the staff will be committed to the cause also (Chalmers, 1992). “The principal is the person most likely to be in a position to shape the organizational conditions necessary for change” (Fullan with Stiegelbauer, 1991). This was something that the participants in the study realized.

...I...think that you have to have support from the administration because if you don't have support from them then you can't go anywhere...(Laura, Final Interview, 5/99).

The administration must be willing to allow the plan to evolve and change direction as needed as the program progresses. This must be a flexible planning process (Powell and Hyle, 1997). This was one area that some of the participants expressed as a key element in the process of change and as an area for improvement.

...One concern that I had was Administrative support. It's not that I don't feel support, I guess maybe that's the wrong way to phrase it, but a concern that I have is that I think that we were just kind of thrown into this without any preparation from the administration and they told us we were going to do it, we talked about it once or twice, but when it really came down to it, I don't think that they helped the people that were going into the classroom to deal with some of the issues. We kind of had to do it on our own (Terry, Initial Interview, 10/98).

Some participants felt like they received little or no support at all from the school's administration.

I don't know as the administration knows that much about what is going on in the classroom... (Sarah, Final Interview, 5/99).

I feel like that's probably the biggest downfall...the support of the staff...from the administration. It was basically dumped and said 'Okay, now do it and run with it' when in fact many of us haven't had the training... (Jane, Second Interview, 2/99).

I think it could be a good program...if we have the support of the administration...but until that happens, I just don't see it (Jane, Second Interview, 2/99).

Other participants felt that there was some support from the administration, but that the program would have been more effective if there had been more support.

I think they (the administrators) are...involved, but I think they often fail to make sure we understand what is going on. I think they...think they are aware of everything that is happening, but I don't feel like it comes back to us enough. The teachers need to be aware too (Brenda, Final Interview, 5/99).

...I would like the administration to be up on it a little bit more...know what is going on and truly what is happening in the classroom which I don't feel they...necessarily do (Jane, Final Interview, 5/99).

One participant pointed out just exactly how the administration could have provided better support of the inclusion program throughout the entire year.

...flexibility should have been given the first year and eased into this new plan rather than the way it was handled this year...there was no meeting...for us to air our feelings. Sometimes all you need to do is just talk about it and that was never allowed because...I think that the people that were running the program were so defensive of the program, defensive and inflexible in my opinion (Gina, Final Interview, 5/99).

It was the general feeling of the majority of the participants that there should have been a greater amount of administrative support in order to make the inclusion plan run more smoothly. The participants expressed how important the administrator was in starting a new program. This coincides with the information that was previously stated about what an important role the administrator plays in the planning and implementing of an inclusion program.

## CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSIONS

### Conclusion

The goal of this research study was to observe the process of change that an elementary staff experiences when special education inclusion is mandated by a school wide plan. This was a major change that occurred and I had the opportunity to look at the way it affected not only the classroom teachers, but also the special education teachers. Through the data gathered from the interviews with the administrator, I was also able to get their views and thoughts about the inclusion plan.

As stated earlier, most of the research and relevant literature available discusses either why or why not educators should use an inclusion plan. This information has usually been from the special education perspective. I feel that this study is beneficial because it presents perspectives from more than multiple viewpoints.

Although the participants all were exposed to the same inclusion plan, the participants' views differed somewhat on the definition of inclusion and what the clear goal of the program was. At the beginning of the study, six regular classroom teachers were selected to continue their participation in the study based on either their high willingness or low willingness to participate in the inclusion plan. They shared their views, beliefs, and opinions of the program at different times throughout the school year. Although their views may have shifted slightly as the year progressed, the willingness to participate stayed fairly consistent.

None of the participants had exactly the same outlook on special education inclusion or the changes that had occurred in their school the past year, but many agreed

that the inclusion program set up was benefiting the students. They felt that the program should be continued, although problems needed to be addressed and changes might need to be made.

While the roles of the participants were very different, either because of teaching at differing grade levels, or because some were classroom teachers and some were school specialists, many of the participants found themselves in similar situations. Many of the staff members dealt with the same type of difficulties and also shared similar successes. Many shared concerns about the inclusion program that their school was implementing and felt the need for an organized forum to discuss these concerns. Some of the concerns expressed, as detailed in the emergent themes section, were lack of training, the absence of a clear definition of inclusion, minimal administrative support, and inadequate amount of time for preparation and planning purposes. While most of the participants felt that there was room for improvement or wished that the program would have been implemented in a more efficient manner, most agreed stated that they felt that they were making a move in the right direction. They felt the plan's goal should be whatever was best for the children. They wanted to take a closer look at what they were doing and evaluate the process of change in order to be better prepared in a similar situation.

It is important to note that an obvious perspective missing from this multi-perspective study is that of the parents. This choice was a voluntary limitation in order to keep the focus of the study narrow.



### Recommendations for Practice

After gathering and evaluating the data generated by this study, there are some recommendations that can be made for the future when anticipating a major change in school policy. The recommendations stem from the themes that developed as the study progressed.

One key area that the teachers discussed was a lack of training or the feeling of not being properly prepared for the change to the inclusion plan. The issue of staff training ties in with the lack of communication that many of the participants experienced. The issues of teacher training, communication, and administrative support are all interrelated. All of the themes that developed are connected and many are connected on multiple levels. By addressing some of the themes early on in the transition process, a school district may be able to avoid some of the difficulties that participants in this study experienced. For example, by addressing the need for teacher training in the area of inclusion, the staff would be more likely to have a similar definition of what inclusion is and this in turn would act as a catalyst to the communication process. The goals of the program should be clearly stated and the staff have the opportunity to voice questions or concerns. Such training may help the staff to better anticipate the changes and possibly react more positively to the changes that occur.

It is my recommendation that while all of the themes that developed deserve attention, the one common thread that ties all of the themes together and is the most important when developing a school wide inclusion plan, is teacher training. By providing adequate teacher training a chain of events occur. The administration is

communicating with the staff, the staff is aware of the expectations put on them, they have a strong understanding of the goal of the program, they feel supported by the administration and, in turn, their reaction to the change at hand will be a more positive reaction that if they had not received the necessary training.

### Recommendations for Future Research

After completing the study and compiling the data, there are still issues that this study raised that are, at this time, unanswered. There are some questions that the reader may have that deal with the effectiveness of an inclusion program. These questions would be most effectively answered in a quantitative study comparing test scores of relevant information. But there are some issues raised that are left unanswered that tie in with the qualitative nature of this study. Future research could continue the study as the program goes into its second year.

One benefit of future research would be to add to the narrow literature base that exists on this topic. As stated earlier, there are numerous sources on special education, gifted education, and even on inclusion. The majority of the literature, however, is from the special education perspective. By involving regular classroom teachers in research studies similar to this one, issues such as inclusion can be explored from multiple perspectives from the educational profession.

There is also the issue of teacher training. Some of the participants felt poorly trained to deal with special needs students and didn't feel like that was an area that they wished to be trained in. Where is the line between the regular classroom teacher and the special education teacher? Is there even a line? At what point does the classroom

teacher determine that this child has more needs that they can deliver in an inclusive classroom? While there are many tangents that one may come up with when extending this study, I feel the most interesting follow up to this study would simply be to continue to watch this inclusion program grow and develop over the next few years. I would like to see how the participants continue to adjust to the inclusion plan, or to see if the inclusion plan will even exist in the next few years.

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### **Appendix: Initial Interview Questions**

1. How many years have you been teaching? What ages/grade levels of students have you taught?
2. What sort of training have you had? Where? Did you take any special classes for special education?
3. Are you currently taking any classes?
4. What made you go into education?
5. Tell me about your present classroom. What age group are you working with? How many students do you have in your class?
6. Do you have any students with special needs in your class? How many and what are their disabilities? What other educators or aides, if any, work with these students?
7. How much time do you have to plan your daily activities? Do you plan on a daily/weekly/monthly basis? Do you plan by yourself or with other educators? Who are they? Who sees your plans? Are you satisfied with the amount of time that you have to plan?
8. Tell me your strengths as an educator. What are the areas, if any, that you would like to improve in?
9. Describe the daily schedule in your classroom. What are the times that other educators or aides are in your room? Do any children leave the room for special instruction? If so, for what and how long?

10. How do you feel inclusion has worked in your classroom for the students/educators/parents so far this year?
11. Are you aware of how other teachers in your school are working with inclusion?  
How are you aware?
12. Do you exchange ideas/methods/suggestions/concerns with other educators about inclusion? When and where do you discuss this?
13. So you observe other classrooms? If so, how do you arrange and schedule this?
14. What are your concerns, if any, about special education inclusion?