

Perceptions of Elementary Special Education Teachers Regarding Inclusion of Students with
Learning Disabilities



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Abstract

This interpretive case study explored three special education teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusion of seven to year old students with learning disabilities into general education classrooms. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the way students learn in inclusive settings and to determine factors that special educators perceive as facilitators and barriers to inclusion. While interviews, observations of professional development, and document analysis were planned, interviews were the only data gathering technique used due to rescheduling of the professional development. Findings suggest that students with learning disabilities can rise to the expectations and requirements set forth in a general education classroom. The findings also show that special education teachers' perceptions vary regarding inclusion and weigh heavily on the relationships formed with their co-teachers and the ability of the particular student.

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Chapter 1

Perceptions of Elementary Special Education Teachers Regarding Inclusion of Students with Learning Disabilities

Special education is constantly changing. Approval of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 required public schools to open their doors to individuals with disabilities and provide them a free and appropriate education. An amendment to this law was implemented in 1997 and is commonly referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1997). IDEA 1997 was amended again seven years later in 2004 and though it does not require inclusion practices, it does mandate “that children with disabilities be educated in the ‘least restrictive environment appropriate’ to meet their ‘unique needs.’ IDEA also contemplates that the ‘least restrictive environment’ analysis will begin with placement in the regular education classroom” (Stout, 2007). In this midst of these changes was the passing of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). In addition to assessing students with disabilities and tracking progress with a goal of proficiency by 2014, this federally mandated piece of legislation provided an additional “backdrop for the inclusion push by requiring highly qualified status for the teacher assigning the grade for a particular subject” (Goodin, 2011, p. 13). Restructuring of schools had to take place to meet the standards set forth in NCLB because many special education teachers were not highly qualified in all academic areas (Cousar, 2007 as cited in Goodin, 2011, p. 13). This restructuring consisted of changes to the service delivery model; students with disabilities are now taught with their typically developing peers and receive inclusion services provided by special education staff in a general education classroom. This allows the child access to grade level curriculum taught by highly qualified personnel while receiving accommodations and modifications they need to be successful in that environment.

Problem Statement

Unfortunately, research shows that too often schools implement inclusionary practices without proper training and support in place for all involved to experience success. Regular education teachers aren't being taught how to teach students with disabilities, and special education teachers struggle to find their place within the regular education classroom. Children attend school to learn, prosper, and grow into young adults prepared for life after school. Together these two previously separated worlds of education must come together to provide these children with an appropriate education first and foremost, while closing the achievement gap between students identified as having disabilities and their typically developing peers. The goal of this study was to add to the limited research on special education teachers' perceptions of inclusion and provide our local educational system with a better understanding of the successes and obstacles teachers face in implementing full inclusion and in teaching students with learning disabilities in the general education classroom.

Terminology

The following is a list of terms used throughout the study. These are the terms that the researcher is familiar with but can vary from place to place and I felt the reader may need clarification on specific terms.

Continuum of Services - a range of services available to serve students with disabilities in their least restrictive environment; it may include self-contained special education classrooms, resource classrooms, the inclusion classrooms, or a combination (Rogers, n.d.)

Inclusion – A term “which expresses commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend. It involves bringing the support services to the child (rather than moving the child to the services)

and requires only that the child will benefit from being in the class (rather than having to keep up with the other students)” (Stout, 2007).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) - To the maximum extent appropriate children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (IDEA, 2004).

Partial Inclusion – refers to a service delivery model similar to mainstreaming in which students with special education services are educated for a portion of their day in the regular education classroom, with support if needed, and educated for another portion of the day a special education classroom (Astor, 2006).

Specific Learning Disability or Learning Disability (LD) – “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations, and that adversely affects a child’s educational performance” (Tennessee Department of Education, 2008).

Research Statement

In this interpretive case study, I interviewed three special education teachers from a rural county of Middle Tennessee in order to explore their perceptions of inclusive educations for children seven to ten years old who have learning disabilities.

Research Questions

Most elementary schools within the system have transitioned to inclusion over the last five years of so, however the 2012-2013 school year was first year it was implemented countywide, kindergarten through eighth grade. Some of the older students who were transitioned from pull-out to inclusion had never been exposed to the same behavioral and academic expectations as their peers. This caused many to struggle in maintaining pace with the general education curriculum this past school year and frustration on the part of the regular education teacher. Other special education teachers within the county have already experienced this transition and figured out what works for their personal situations in teaching students with learning disabilities within the general education classroom, and for that reason I want to explore how special education teachers have adapted and adjusted to the implementation of inclusion.

The following questions guided my research:

1. What are special education teachers' perceptions of the way students learn in inclusive settings?
2. What are special education teachers' experiences with inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the regular classroom?

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Various factors and practices influence the success of inclusion. Teachers' attitude towards inclusion is one of the most important determinants in the success of a student's inclusive education (Ali, Mustapha, & Jelas, 2006; Garriott, Synder, Tennant, & Ringlaben, 2004; Leatherman, 2007; Male, 2011; Mousel, 2004; Short & Martin, 2005; Sparks, 2009). Vaughn and Schumm (1995) suggest that as part of responsible inclusion practices, administrators should allow participating teachers the right to choose whether or not they teach inclusion classes; teachers who are forced to teach inclusion classes typically do not create a supportive environment for students with learning disabilities to reach their fullest academic potential (Sparks, 2009, p. 87). The purpose of this study was to explore special education teachers' perceptions of inclusive educations for elementary aged children with learning disabilities in an attempt to answer the following questions: 1) What are special education teachers' perceptions of the way students learn in inclusive settings? and 2) What are special education teachers' experiences with inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the regular classroom?

Chapter two's review of literature pertains to the inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the general education classroom and the perceptions and attitudes of various stakeholders. In gathering literature, electronic databases were accessed through Tennessee Technological University's (TTU) Angelo and Jeannette Volpe Library. Key terms used in the search for literature included *inclusion*, *special education*, *special education teacher*, *students with learning disabilities*, and *preservice teacher programs for inclusion*. The review of literature found that the number of studies available on special education teachers' perceptions of and attitudes towards inclusive educations for students with learning disabilities was limited.

This review is not exhaustive; it is restricted by time constraints and availability of sources.

Three categories divide the literature review: *Teacher Preparation*, *Stakeholders Attitudes and Perceptions*, and *Student Learning*. Subcategories include *differing views*, *decision making*, and *co-teaching*.

Teacher Preparation

Garriott, et al. (2004) conducted a qualitative study to evaluate preservice teachers' attitude and beliefs regarding the inclusion of children with severe disabilities in the general education classroom. The 35 preservice teachers interviewed, both general and special education majors, were enrolled in Introduction to Education indicating the beginning of their teacher education programs. Garriott et al. (2004) examined the participants' preconceived attitudes and beliefs towards the inclusion of students with severe disabilities in regular education class and found that 56% felt that either full inclusion or a combination of general and special education settings was the most appropriate placement, while 43% preferred self-contained classrooms or other special placements (p. 20). According to Garriott et.al., this poses a challenge for teacher education programs; they must not only provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary for successful inclusion, but also positively affect preservice teachers' perceptions of students with disabilities. Participants' beliefs regarding the inclusion of students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms were affected by prior experiences in school, influences of family and friends, a personal belief system that values social inclusion and equity, special education coursework, and experiences at work (p. 18).

In the quantitative study conducted by Male (2011), the researcher surveyed 48 teachers enrolled in the master's program Special and Inclusive Education to determine if an attitudinal shift towards inclusion could be achieved through professional development. The aim of the 10-

week course on Concepts and Contexts of Special and Inclusive Education was to raise awareness of various issues and dilemmas within special education and particularly inclusive educations (Male, 2011, p. 183). The 16 items on the Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education Scale (ATIES) related to four categories of inclusion: physical/sensory, social, academic, and behavioral objectives; they rated their attitudes on a Likert-type scale before and after the duration of the course. Participants overall mean score the first time was 4.23 compared to the second time a 4.86. This difference was “significant ($p < .001$) indicating a more positive overall attitude towards inclusion of pupils with special education needs at the end of the module, compared with at the beginning” (p. 184). According to the researcher, professional development indicated a positive attitudinal change towards inclusion. It should be noted that the participants of this study were enrolled in the Special and Inclusive Education program and were likely more open to change than those not interested in the field.

Teachers' willingness to accept all students with special educational, behavioral, or physical needs is critical to successful inclusion. According to Ali et al. (2006), teachers' “attitude and knowledge about inclusive education are important as these are indicators of such willingness” (p. 36). In their descriptive study, 235 regular and special education teachers across Malaysia responded to a survey about attitudes and knowledge regarding inclusive education. The findings suggested that the majority of teachers felt inclusive education was appropriate for students with special needs, including those with visual impairments, hearing impairments, and learning disabilities; however, only 50.6% of the participants felt the students' academic needs were better served in the inclusive classroom (p. 39). The author's stated that in addition to collaboration with the special education teacher, open and honest communication, and shared decision making among the school administration and teachers, teacher training institutes played

a vital role in preparing for successful inclusion and should integrate the theory into their curriculum so that both regular and special education teachers are prepared. Of the 235 participants, only 69 felt that regular education teachers had the exposure, training, and skills to teach students with special needs (p. 42). Ali et al. suggested that institutions not just discuss the issues and concepts related to inclusion and effective teaching practices with their prospective teachers, but also give them “structured opportunities to experience inclusive education in practice” (pp. 42–43).

While the attitudes and perceptions of preservice teachers towards inclusion are important characteristics to consider when planning to become a teacher, even more important are the attitudes and perceptions of those in the classroom and system at the current time. These persons directly affect the success of the program. The next section will discuss how various stakeholders perceive inclusion.

Stakeholders' attitudes and perceptions

Some teachers question their ability or willingness to teach children with learning disabilities. In an attempt to answer the research question *What are the reasons given for general education teachers' resistance to teaching in inclusion classrooms?* Sparks (2009) conducted a qualitative, narrative, phenomenological interview study with 20 participants who teach first through fifth grades in eastern Virginia. Of the 20 participants, 11 taught inclusion classes at the time of the study; 44% of the participants not teaching inclusion were unwilling to do so. Participants not willing to participate in inclusive environments noted personality conflicts and/or conflicting ideologies with the co-teacher (11%), inappropriate student-teacher ratio (33%), lack of specialized training (44%), and the fear that including students with disabilities would slow down the progress of the class (11%) (Sparks, 2009, p. 75). Later in the interview

process, participants were asked whether, provided with the appropriate tools, training, and support, they would be willing to teach in inclusive classrooms. The majority of participants (18 of 20) stated with adequate support and training they would be willing. These findings suggest that the majority of regular education teachers are “willing to teach in inclusion classrooms, but concerned about their own needs to teach children with disabilities” (p. 104).

Leatherman (2007) conducted a narrative study of eight female teachers exploring factors and resources that influenced the perceptions of their early childhood inclusive classrooms. None of the participants held a special education degree; all began their career in non-inclusive classrooms but taught in inclusive settings at the time of the study (with one exception – the participant was on maternity leave but wished to return to an inclusive classroom). Leatherman designed the study to explore only the perceptions of teachers who expressed positive views of inclusion; while some considered this a limitation, the researcher wanted administrators and other teachers to see the value of inclusive environments. The participants were supported by administrators, peers, the special education teacher, and therapists, which led to a feeling of success. In addition to previous positive experiences involving children with disabilities, participants' beliefs that they were contributing to academic and social growth of the children in their classroom and growing as a professional influenced their perceptions and decisions to teach in inclusive environments.

Regular and special education teachers, students, and parents of included students with learning disabilities are expected to note effects of inclusive education for children with learning disabilities. However, further studies have found administrators, school psychologists, teacher educators, and faculty members have also experienced unintentional effects of inclusion for students with learning disabilities in the general education classroom. In analyzing various

studies, Tankersley and Cook found that all studies reported unexpected benefits of including students with learning disabilities into the general education classrooms. However, several studies reported “less discussion of and reduced specificity related to benefits of inclusion when compared to talk about challenges. In fact, Dyson (2007) reported that she had to prompt families to discuss positive outcomes...” of inclusion (Tankersley & Cook, 2007, p. 3). The stakeholders perceived that students with learning disabilities experienced academic growth and social acceptance as a result of inclusive educations. Many of the professionals associated with inclusive educations (regular education, psychologists, faculty members, and teacher educators) expressed they had to change their practices as a result of inclusion but experienced satisfaction with newly defined roles. On the other hand, participants of the special education teachers' focus group felt “powerless in their roles in inclusion classrooms” (p. 6); one remarked, “You used to be the CEO and now they don't let you sit at the conference table” (p. 6) while expressing frustration associated with inclusion. The included students felt that special education teachers spent more time helping all students in the class, limiting the amount of one-on-one assistance received; the participants interviewed expressed “an unambiguous preference for the instruction offered by special education teachers in resource classrooms” (p. 7). Most of the participating interviewees among the eight focus groups saw inclusion as having a negative impact upon themselves and, more importantly, upon the students with learning disabilities.

Similar to the participants' perceptions in the previous study, those in Ratcliff's 2009 phenomenological study expressed frustration with inclusion as well. The study explored perspectives of three regular education classroom teachers of fully included students. The three participants taught in partial inclusive settings for three years prior to the implementation of full inclusion the year of the study. Ratcliff conducted both classroom and participant observations as

well as individual interviews to better understand the perceptions of full inclusion, student learning, and stress associated with teaching inclusive classrooms. In analyzing the data, the researcher identified three themes relating to participants' emotional reactions to implementing full inclusion, their perceptions of student learning, and their viewpoints on full inclusion (Ratcliff, 2009, p. 8). The participants' frustrations with full inclusion stemmed from insufficient training provided prior to implementation, being required to modify tests and assignments for their students, lack of academic progress, collaborative efforts with special education staff, and the feeling that administration wouldn't listen to concerns. Participants felt full inclusion restricted student progress. The pace of the curriculum was too difficult for students who struggled and the extra time spent with these students limited enrichment activities for higher achieving students (Ratcliff, 2009). Behavior problems were also reported to negatively affect instructional time and added to the stress participants experienced. None of the participants felt that full inclusion was appropriate for every student with a disability and suggested returning to the prior model of partial inclusion in which students were included in the regular education classroom for science and social studies and the resource room for mathematics, reading, and language arts (p. 12).

Five years earlier Mousel's (2004) study examined general education teachers' perceptions of included students with learning disabilities. Eighty teachers from a high school in Georgia completed a quantitative survey on a Likert scale; ten of those participants were randomly chosen to participate in an additional qualitative component of the study consisting of a series of interviews and observations. Participants reported that an average of three students with learning disabilities were enrolled per class period. According to the survey, participants perceived students' language ability to be a major obstacle in successfully including students

with learning disabilities into high school courses; the language delay hindered communication, instruction, and assessment. In contrast to participants' responses during the interviews, the researcher noted in field notes taken during classroom observations that included students, "particularly those whose language abilities were very low, never spoke. When the learning-disabled students did speak, they spoke mostly to the teacher, not with their classmates" (Mousel, 2004, p. 117). Of the participants surveyed, 74% thought students should reach a minimum level of academic success (reading and comprehension) before being placed in the inclusion class (p. 133). In addition to the language barrier, participants felt inadequately prepared and supported to teach students with learning disabilities. They felt that modifying the curriculum slowed the progress of the entire class and feared the implications on standardized tests, and they were willing to fail students who did not put forth their best effort regardless of a learning disability.

Short and Martin's (2005) case study explored the perceptions of 13 regular education teachers, seven special education teachers, 29 students with disabilities and 43 students without disabilities to determine the extent that participants felt inclusion was beneficial. The setting was a rural Midwest high school. It is important to note the following characteristics related to setting of the current study because of the similarities to my proposed study: limited amount of available outside support, few training programs for preservice teachers, few professional development opportunities, increasing numbers of students living in poverty, and less personnel to provide a continuum of services (Short & Martin, 2005, pp. 2–3). Data collection consisted of observations, surveys, and interviews with participants; while the researchers conducted a mixed methods study, it was primarily qualitative in nature (p. 3). Special education teachers perceived the benefits of inclusion to be more positive than the other three groups perceived the benefits.

Socialization was perceived to be the greatest benefit of inclusion among all four groups. Involvement in the decision regarding inclusion received the highest rating regarding attitudes. Students perceived teachers to be caring and accepting, but felt the large class sizes created more distractions and limited the amount of individual assistance received.

In trying to develop a better understanding of the various dynamics associated with the inclusion programs of an East Tennessee school system, Goodin (2011) interviewed 11 certified special education teachers from four high schools. The experiences and perceptions of special educators were explored throughout Goodin's phenomenological study and led the researcher to identify several facilitating factors as well as barriers to successful inclusion for students with special needs in the regular education classroom. In addition to transcriptions of individual interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, the researcher analyzed participants' "paralinguistic behaviors. . . providing further insight as to their true feelings regarding the inclusion model" (Goodin, 2011, p. 127). While the participants' definition of inclusion varied, all preferred the practice of mainstreaming or partial inclusion over full inclusion. Like the regular education teachers in Ratcliff's (2009) study, participants of the Goodin's study felt that some students lack prerequisite skills needed to benefit from instruction in the general education classroom.

The participants of Goodin's (2011) study perceived their role in the current delivery service model as that of a support system to the general educators; they reported that they modify content and assignments, provide materials and manipulatives, assist with effective teaching strategies, and guide/advocate for students with disabilities without being a dominate force in the classroom. One participant was quoted: "We bring more patience" (Goodin, 2011, p. 152). Several of the special education teachers interviewed felt their attention to each individual

student's work completion (making sure it was completed and turned in) and their ability to regularly communicate with parents about student progress were a benefit to the regular education teachers. One barrier noted was the attitude towards special education teachers; participants felt they were looked at as "less than a teacher" (p. 174) and "special education teachers are not *real* teachers" (p. 174). Another stated "that we (special education teachers) need to be promoted" (p. 174).

According to Goodin, (2011), regular education teachers' role was perceived to be one of expertise in the subject matter being taught, and who could offer all students diversity in their environment, experiences, and interactions with peers. Students were exposed to different personalities, different types of people, and new peer groups, much like the real world. Participants' ability to co-teach was affected by their interpretation of a state law which mandated "100% of special education staff's time to be spent with special education students only" (Goodin, 2011, p. 159). They found themselves having to take a step back from partnering with the general education teacher, which hurt the relationships that had formed.

When asked about the perceived benefits of inclusion for students, the participants all agreed upon acceptance; regular education teachers and peers accepted them, as did the students' peers. Ronnie, an interviewee, stated "They feel more like normal students than a special student . . ." (Goodin, 2011, p. 165). Other perceived social benefits included assertiveness and self-advocacy. Academically, the majority of students with disabilities enrolled in inclusion classes graduated with a regular education diploma; participants felt that inclusion enabled students to meet the criteria and requirements of a regular diploma (p. 169).

Common issues identified as barriers to successful inclusion were large class sizes, high stakes testing, and the lack of teacher preparation, adequate time for planning, communication,

and content mastery by the special education teacher. Each of the 11 participants were certified special education teachers with formalized training, yet they still expressed concerns “with shortcomings in their preparation to work with special needs students with different developmental, adaptive, cognitive, physical, and emotional needs” (Goodin, 2011, p. 179). Participants also felt unprepared to transition from pull-out classes to the inclusion model with no guidance. Special education teachers’ large caseloads (some noting 70 students) and excessive amounts of paperwork prohibited them from adequately providing services to students; participants gave up duty free lunch and planning times, devoting this time to paperwork required by the state. Funding was presented as an obstacle to successful inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education classrooms; special education teachers do not have the same access to technology, even simple things like “fancy calculators” (p. 200) needed for students enrolled in general education Algebra classes. Student attitude and motivation were also identified as obstacles the school faced while trying to implement inclusionary practices. Repeated absences and distress from being singled out as a *special education student* were also mentioned.

Differing views. Participants and/or stakeholders in the following studies have opposing views regarding the inclusion of students with learning disabilities into the general education classroom.

Daane, Beirne-Smith, and Latham (2000) investigated administrators’ and teachers’ perceptions of inclusive educations for students with disabilities in the elementary grades. The researcher used a Likert-type instrument to survey 324 general education teachers, 42 special education teachers, and 15 administrators from a southeast rural school district. The researchers also conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 participants: four randomly selected regular

education teachers, one special education teacher, and one administrator from each of the regular education teachers' buildings. Inclusion was implemented two years prior to the study, and the district had provided no in-services on inclusion or collaboration. The findings of the study revealed discrepancies among the three groups' perceptions of collaboration. None of the groups indicated they were comfortable collaborating with one another. When surveyed, administrators agreed with the statement that the inclusive classroom was most effective for students with disabilities, and both groups of teachers disagreed. Special education teachers interviewed felt pull-out services were still necessary for some students; the study did not clarify if the district provided a continuum of services or if these pull-out services were in addition to the inclusion. All three groups disagreed with the statement that included students receive effective instruction in general education classroom. Both groups of teachers perceived there to be more behavior management issues after students with disabilities were included in the general education environment. Similar to participants' perceptions in other studies, the majority of special education teachers in this study felt regular education teachers were not prepared to teach students with disabilities. Most importantly, all three groups "disagreed with the idea that students with disabilities achieved more academic success in the general education classroom" (Daane, et al. 2000, p. 335); participants felt while included students demonstrated social growth, previously segregated students did not have the self-direction, self-esteem, or motivation to do well in the general education classroom.

Cook, Semmel, and Gerber (1999) suggested there was a difference in the attitudes of principals and special education teachers toward the inclusion of students with disabilities. Participants of the study included 49 principals, 29 elementary special education teachers, and 35 junior high special education teachers from southern California. The participants were part of a

larger study, the School Environment Project (SEP), which examined the effects of school environments on the performance and self-esteem of included students with mild disabilities, and were chosen for the current study because they completed a portion of the SEP questionnaire regarding inclusion. These 21 statements on the SEP were drawn from the Regular Education Initiative Teacher Survey (REITS) and were used to investigate participants' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with mild disabilities on a Likert-type scale. Principals expressed greater agreement in regards to the academic achievement of included students and felt consultative services were the most appropriate service model for students with mild disabilities. Whereas special education teachers expressed greater agreement than principals in regards to the monies devoted to special education students; they felt it must be reserved for those students regardless of placement (Cook, et al. 1999, p. 206).

Hatchell (2009) conducted a study to determine if a significant difference existed among regular education and special education teachers' attitudes and opinions of inclusion. The participants – 23 middle school teachers from a school district in south central Wisconsin – responded to a three-part, 30-item survey; the first part included demographic information, the second 26 questions with Likert-type responses, and the third a comment section. A total of 17% of the participants were special educators while 82.6% held a regular education degree. Differences did exist among the two responding groups; however similarities were noted as well. Regular education teachers were more likely to agree that students with disabilities demonstrated more behavior problems within the classroom and required more attention than typical students of general education classrooms. The majority of participants felt more professional development was needed and common planning time with the special education staff to address modifications, accommodations, and teaching strategies. Participants from both groups agreed that collaboration

was necessary, that they felt comfortable team teaching, and that students were accepted by peers and experienced social growth as a result of inclusion. The study also showed that 100% of the participants reported that “students with learning disabilities are able to actively participate in general education classroom learning activities” (Hatchell, 2009, p. 27).

Just as various stakeholders' perceptions differ regarding inclusion, students with learning disabilities learn differently than their peers. The following section discusses perceptions regarding the way students with learning disabilities learn.

Student Learning

The purpose of DeSimone & Parmar's (2006) study was to survey general education teachers' beliefs and self-perceived knowledge about teaching students with learning disabilities in inclusive middle school mathematics classes. However, this nationwide descriptive study of 226 teachers revealed the majority do not feel prepared and do not possess strategies to adapt their instruction for students with learning disabilities in the inclusion classroom. This is significant because “students with learning disabilities (LD) are the largest special education group to be included in general education classes” (DeSimone and Parmar, 2006, p. 98). Four out of every five participants surveyed *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that students with learning disabilities should have the opportunity to learn alongside their non-disabled peers; however, only 41% agreed that these students were best taught in inclusive classrooms (p. 102). In addition to the survey, a purposeful sampling of 26 participants was selected for a follow-up phone interview; throughout the interviews, participants shared their struggle with motivating and maintaining students' attention to instruction. Of the 26-six phone participants, 20 stated they did not feel their pre-service programs adequately prepared them for working with students

who have learning disabilities by providing them with instructional strategies to teach math concepts to these students nor providing them with practicum or observation times (p. 106).

Tobin (2007) conducted a case study exploring the manner in which two inclusion teachers and the principal at an elementary school enhance the experience of inclusion for students with disabilities, including learning disabilities. Data were gathered throughout a series of observations in the two inclusion classrooms, interviews with the educators to discuss their engagement strategies for students with disabilities, and interviews with five students exploring their perceptions about *mattering* and inclusion. One participant facilitated positive experiences by including all students “in the development of a community of inquirers, differentiating instruction, and using her own voice in the classroom to elevate their status among peers” (Tobin, 2007, para. 30). The other inclusion teacher facilitated positive experiences through “social interaction with peers, folding them into her accountability routines, and basic accommodation strategies to keep her students with exceptionalities involved in her classroom” (para. 30). *Good News Visits* were weekly informal meetings the principal had with included students. The classroom teacher would inform the administrator of good behavior or academic successes, and the principal would then follow up with the student either at lunch, in the hallway, or on the playground. The students perceived themselves as integral parts of their class.

In the qualitative case study by Dyches, Egan, Young, Ingram, Gibb, and Allred (1996), 18 students with learning disabilities were interviewed to explore their perceptions of being included in regular education classrooms. The participants were eighth grade students at a suburban Utah junior high school; all had previously been served special education services under the pull-out model. One hundred thirty students, 19 of whom had individualized education plans (IEP) due to learning disabilities, were taught in teams. Students stayed with those same

130 peers throughout the day and rotated among five general education classrooms and an elective classroom; all classrooms and lockers were located within one wing of the building. The following professionals were on a team: five general education teachers, one special education teacher, and two special education assistants. The team met daily to plan lessons, accommodations, modifications, and strategies to help all students. The regular education teachers did not know which students were serviced with IEPs (Dyches, et al. 1996, p. 9). Results of the study revealed that most students preferred the inclusion classroom over the resource room. Participants weren't singled out or teased as before, felt they learned more and put forth more effort, appreciated teachers' willingness to help, and were comfortable learning alongside peers.

Co-teaching. Peper (2010) conducted a qualitative phenomenological study in which she explored the perceptions of educators who co-teach. The purpose was to better understand the relationship between co-teaching and the outcomes for students with learning disabilities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven regular education and eight special education middle school teachers from New York who taught in co-teaching classrooms. Participants' years of experience co-teaching ranged from one to 30 years (10 years average). Participants identified common planning time, professional development, consistency in co-teaching partners, and structural support as factors contributing to successful co-teaching arrangements. Determining how co-teaching affects students' academic outcomes wasn't achieved in the study. The findings revealed regular education teachers did not change their teaching practices or approaches in inclusive classrooms, and special education teachers, for the most part, provided supplemental instruction (Peper, 2010, p. 80). Peper wrote, "If instruction is undifferentiated and

children with disabilities are instructed as if no disability is present, co-teaching as a specialized instructional approach is questionable” (pp. 80–81).

In 2005, Tobin conducted a case study examining teachers’ use of co-teaching models to support students with learning disabilities in inclusive general education elementary classrooms. A regular education sixth grade language arts teacher, Tobin— a special education teacher— and three students with learning disabilities included in general education classes were participants of the study. Extensive data were collected through taped recordings of participant observations, field notes taken during the two teachers’ planning sessions, and semi-structured interviews with students, the classroom teacher, and the teacher assistant. In addition, the researcher wore a micro-cassette recorder while teaching and made taped records of other participants’ attendance, seating arrangements, and field notes after each observation/co-teaching class. Of the 29 students in the class, five had individual education plans and five others were reluctant readers and writers. The data revealed that students with learning disabilities “performed a type of risk assessment” (p. 796) before asking for help with an assignment: 1) students assessed the level of difficulty the other students were having, 2) gauged how many students were using the Helping Board, 3) checked the availability of an equally confused classmate as an asking partner, and 4) considered the physical proximity of a teacher when asking for assistance. Tobin stated that the three participating students “went without help if they perceived that it was not in their best social interest to ask for it” (p. 798). Interventions were implemented to prevent this situation from re-occurring. The teachers in this particular case-study supported students with learning disabilities by “assuming specific co-teaching roles and responsibilities and structuring specific helping routines” (p. 797).

Decision Making. In Vaughn and Schumm's 1995 article, the author's contrasted "irresponsible" (p. 264) inclusion practices with "responsible" (p. 264) practices for effectively including students with learning disabilities into general education classrooms. Responsible inclusion was defined as "the development of a school-based education model that is student centered and that bases educational placement and service provision on each student's needs" (Vaughn & Schumm, 1995, p. 265). The goal of responsible inclusion is that students remain in the general education setting as long as their social and academic needs are appropriately being met; if not, there is a continuum of services offered. Guidelines of responsible inclusion, according to the authors, include: putting the student –not placement– first, inclusion teachers willingly participate, there are adequate resources (both personnel and materials) provided, and there is ongoing professional development for all personnel involved. By allowing teachers to choose whether or not to participate in inclusionary efforts, the idea is that the ones who volunteer are knowledgeable of students with learning disabilities or at least will be willing to learn which in return will foster a more positive attitude. Another distinguishing characteristic of responsible inclusion involves developing and implementing the service delivery model at the school-based level then continually evaluating it for effectiveness. Responsible inclusion models provide a continuum of services meaning that full inclusion isn't the only option because "not all students will succeed academically and socially when placed in the general education classroom full time" (Vaughn & Schumm, 1995, p. 268).

McLeskey and Waldron (2011) discussed high-quality instruction. With another push for least restrictive environments in the passing of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (2004), more and more students with learning disabilities are being educated in general education settings. In reviewing literature on the effectiveness of fully inclusive programs versus traditional pull-out

programs, the authors stated “Some students obtain better achievement outcomes in inclusive general education settings, while others do better with part-time resource support” (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011, p. 49). Their findings suggested “both inclusive and resource programs *can* be used to improve academic outcomes for elementary students with LD, if high-quality instruction, designed to meet individual student needs is delivered” (p. 49).

Examinations of elementary inclusion classrooms found that general education teachers did not provide “specialized adaptations” (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011, p. 51) to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities; however, they did provide students with a “very good general education” (p. 51). Studies conducted on special education resource, or pull-out, programs found that special education teachers’ caseloads were too large to provide the appropriate, small group, individualized lessons that their students with learning disabilities needed which resulted in “low-quality instruction” (Moody et al., 2000 & Vaughn et. al., 1998 as cited by McLeskey & Waldron, 2001, p. 52).

Conclusions

Teachers in studies examined for this literature review felt past experiences with students who have disabilities, positive relationships with co-teachers, professional growth, and student growth facilitated successful inclusive classrooms. They considered lack of planning time, collaboration, adequate staffing, and large class sizes obstacles to successful inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the general education classroom. Many teachers’ attempts to co-teach failed because of lack of sufficient collaboration, defined roles, and/or personality conflicts. Neither regular education teachers nor special educators felt prepared for including students with disabilities into the general education classroom. These are obstacles that faced on a daily basis with many new teachers within the service delivery model. I feel there is insight to

be gained from this study that will allow next year's program to operate smoother and be more successful for the students.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this interpretive case study was to explore the perceptions of three special education teachers regarding inclusive educations for children seven to ten years old who have learning disabilities. The following questions guided this research process: 1) What are special education teachers' perceptions of the way students learn in inclusive settings? and 2) What are special education teachers' experiences with inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the regular classroom?

Chapter three presents the research methodology used in this study. Boundaries of the case and a description of the type of study, sampling strategy, participants, and the setting follow. The researcher's theoretical perspective, methods of data collection, data analysis, ethical issues, researcher subjectivities, and validity/trustworthiness was also discussed in this chapter.

Research Methods

According to Maxwell (2013), deciding where to conduct research and the selection of participants are essential parts in one's research methods (p. 96).

Setting

The participants of this study are special education teachers in a rural county of Middle Tennessee. The area is largely a farming community with very little industry surrounding it. The county's second red light was just recently installed. Many feel it is stuck in the past so to speak, and until recently, so has its schools. The 2012-2013 school marked the beginning of mandatory inclusion services for children with individualized education plans in kindergarten through eighth grades. Of the approximate 3,600 students, about 15%, had an identified disability and

received special education services in inclusive environments (Tennessee Department of Education, 2012).

Participants

Maxwell (2013) defined purposeful sampling as a strategy in which “particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions and goals, and that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 97). The specific purposeful sampling strategy used to identify participants in this study was typical case sampling which “highlights what is typical, normal, or average” (Patton, p. 243, 2002).

The system employs 20 special educators and only a limited number of those meet the criteria of the case’s boundaries: participants must be a special education inclusion teacher for seven to ten year old children with learning disabilities included the general education classroom. The five potential participants were contacted about their possible participation in the study and three were sent a consent form and contacted a week later regarding their participation in the study. All three participants have taught in both the pull-out and the inclusion service delivery model. Their perceptions of inclusive educations for children with learning disabilities and factors that facilitate successful inclusion and obstacles encountered along the way were discussed during the interview process.

Theoretical perspective

As Glesne (2011) wrote, when one conducts research with the intent to interpret the social world from the perspectives of those who experience it, they are using an interpretivist approach (p. 8). Sipe and Constable (1999) support this theory with their description, stating that “reality is subjective and constructed” (p. 154), there are many truths, and the interpretivist approach seeks to understand the social world. The interpretivist approach is appropriate for the

current study because the framework allows the researcher to “observe, ask questions, and interact with research participants” (Glesne, p.8, 2011). As the researcher, I sought a better understanding of how special education teachers perceived the inclusion of students with learning disabilities into the general education classroom, inquiring about their personal experiences with inclusion and the way students learn.

Type of study

A case study “is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (Creswell, p. 73, 2007). More specifically, the current study is a collective case study. According to Creswell, when a researcher identifies one issue to explore and selects multiple cases to illustrate the issue, a collective case study is employed (p. 74). The boundaries for the current study included special education teachers who teach seven to 10 year old students eligible for services with a diagnosis of *learning disability* or *specific learning disability*, and participants must have taught in both inclusion classrooms and traditional pull-out classrooms. Multiple teachers participated in order to explore various perceptions.

Data collection

The special education supervisor gave permission for contacting those teachers who met the case's boundaries and recommended three to contact first. After initial contact was made, I then obtained consent forms from participants and began collecting data. In order to obtain a “deepened, complex understanding” (Glesne, p. 48, 2011), multiple data collecting techniques were planned. An interview guide (See Appendix A) was developed for use during the individual, semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was selected because the

“interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions” (Patton, 2002, p. 343) which allowed conversation on relevant topics that surfaced during the interview. A digital recorder recorded the dialogue during the interviews while I took field notes. I had planned to observe one professional development opportunity regarding inclusion that each of the participants chose to attend and analyze documents that were prepared for that in-service, however, it was rescheduled and is not within the time limits of the this research project.

Data analysis

Data gathered during the interviews were analyzed using constant case comparison. The process began by listening to the tapes multiple times and then transcribing the interviews. I sent transcriptions to the participants so they could check for accuracy. I then created a coding procedure to record important ideas found across the cases while analyzing data. This was manipulated many times before settling on codes, categories, and themes. Comparing and contrasting the data can “trigger questions about relationships” (Glesne, 2011, p. 188) among the data and data sources. Constant case comparison allowed me to identify common themes or ideas my participants hold, as well as perceptions that were particular to individual participants.

Ethical issues

Participant selection began after gaining full approval from Tennessee Technological University's (TTU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) (See Appendix B). Consent forms (See Appendix C) were given to participants that met the case's criteria. Participants had one week to consider their involvement in the study. During the interview process no questions were asked about a particular student or situation. Participants were given the option not to answer questions they were uncomfortable answering; one participant asked to skip a question regarding their ideal inclusion model and I failed to follow up with that question. There were no foreseeable

risks for participants. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned and all data was stored on a password protected computer. Data will be stored for one year then destroyed.

Researcher Subjectivities

Growing up in a small rural town in Middle Tennessee, I graduated from the same school building that I entered as a five year old child. I spent the vast majority of the years in that building planning to become a teacher. My definition of teacher varied only in what grade/subject you taught. I do not think *special education* was introduced into my vocabulary until I entered high school. I had an art class in the special education classroom and comparing my classwork to the assignments on display in that classroom, I assumed that class was for the lazy kids.

My very first job offer was lead teacher in a self-contained junior high special education classroom. I was fresh out of college and in desperate need of a job so I accepted immediately. It was only after accepting the position that reality hit me; I was about to embark on an endeavor I knew *nothing* about. I had prepared myself to teach young, typically developing children. Now, three years later, I could not imagine my life had I not taken that job offer.

The world of special education is constantly changing. One major adjustment my local school district recently implemented is full inclusion of students with learning disabilities. There was no discussion, no training or support provided for teachers or students prior to the transition to inclusion.

As a special education teacher, I now know that these students were not lazy. They just needed an extra push and different instruction than perhaps I received in my classroom. I hear students discuss how hard the curriculum is and their desire to go back to the way it was last year when they were pulled out for special education classes; I understand their desires. I have heard

regular education teachers fuss about having students with disabilities included in their classroom and the challenges they face on a daily basis. I can empathize with them as well.

The purpose of this study was to learn more about special education teachers' experiences since the implementation of inclusion and their perceptions of student learning in regular education classrooms. I wanted to know what the participants perceived as challenges and how they have overcome them so I can be of more support to my co-teachers and most importantly the students who rely on me to help them understand and master grade level curriculum in the ever changing world of education.

However, being a special education teacher and having my own views on the topic may lead me to only hear/recognize data that support my view and ignore the other data provided by participants. This was protected through continuous exploration of my own subjectivity before, during, and after the interviews and while analyzing data as suggested (Peshkin, 1988, p. 18). While taking field notes, I also made note of participants' statements that evoke my subjectivity by arousing feelings within (p. 18). I cannot disregard subjectivities, but being aware of them strengthened my research.

Trustworthiness/Validity

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the credibility of the research, whether one's "work is plausible or credible" (Glesne, 2011, p. 49). In order to establish trustworthiness with readers and ensure that my research is credible, I planned to triangulate sources of data but was unable to. After each interview and transcription of the recordings was complete, member checks were performed to make sure that I accurately interpreted participants' statements and their intentions before including it in my research paper. In the original proposal submitted, observations of professional development and document analysis were planned; however, the

professional development was rescheduled outside the timeframe for this research project. This affected the reliability and trustworthiness of the research findings because results are presented and based on limited data gathering techniques preventing triangulation of sources.

Chapter 4

Data Presentation and Analysis

Chapter four presents data that was gathered. An overview of the data collection process and method used to analyze data follows. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of special education teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the general education classroom; therefore this chapter also attempts to answer the questions guiding this research process.

Presentation of Data

Data were collected by conducting interviews with three special education teachers who fulfilled this case study's boundaries: all have taught students with learning disabilities using the pullout service delivery model but currently teach in inclusive settings for students between seven and 10 years old. The participants were from two different schools within the same district. Interviews were conducted individually with each participant using the interview guide (Appendix A) as a general guideline which allowed exploration of other relevant topics that surfaced during the discussion. After transcribing the recorded interviews, the transcriptions were emailed to the participants so they could ensure that I not only transcribed their words accurately, but that their words reflected their intended meanings. Two of the three participants responded to the email confirming the transcription. Three attempts were made to contact the third participant: two emails were sent (the transcription and an attempt to gather additional data regarding modifying students' work a couple of weeks later) and a friend request on a social media website. The participant has moved out of state since the interview and I have no other contact information for her.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a constant case comparison (Glesne, 2011, p. 187). I began by reading the transcriptions multiple times and highlighting words and phrases that were the essence of participants' responses to each question. I then created a chart with a cell for each of the questions on the interview guide and charted the highlighted words and phrases accordingly. From this chart, a list of codes were created that were reoccurring and/or representative of the responses. Categories were then formed based on similarities or relationships among the codes. After revision, four categories were identified that represent the codes: *Types of Learning Strategies*, *Modification*, *Facilitating Factors*, and *Obstacles*. These categories were then grouped into two themes, *Learning Strategies* and *Experiences*, directly related to the research questions guiding this study:

- 1) What are special education teachers' perceptions of the way students learn in inclusive settings?
- 2) What are special education teachers' experiences with inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the regular education classroom?

Table 1

Themes, Definitions, and Categories

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Definition</u>	<u>Categories</u>
Learning Strategies	The various methods special education teachers use to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Types of Learning Strategies • Modification
Experiences	Obstacles that special education teachers face in implementing full inclusion and things considered necessary for success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating Factors • Obstacles

Learning Strategies

What are special education teachers' perceptions of the way students learn in inclusive settings? In order to answer this question I asked my participants to share the ways in which they felt students with learning disabilities learn best when included in the general education curriculum and how they meet the needs of each of their students. Their responses were grouped into the following two categories, *Types of Learning Strategies* and *Modification*.

Types of Learning Strategies Kinesthetic /interactive assignments and activities, manipulatives, and small group instruction were common responses when asked how the participants meet the needs of students with learning disabilities in the general education classroom. While the three participants talked about various strategies they use to help included students with disabilities, they were general strategies that benefit all students regardless of disability. No one noted particular strategies used specifically for students with learning disabilities. This is demonstrated in Jennifer's response:

I think you have to really modify the way you teach, you can't just get up there stand and talk. Students really need to see things and get interactive with what you're doing. They need to be able to touch things, and they need to get up and move a lot more; at the same time these teaching strategies help the regular education students more as well. You thrive if you're up, moving, hearing, and all the senses are activated.

While she did not feel it was difficult to make lessons interactive for her second and third grade students, she did explain that language and written work was more difficult. "It is hard getting my students to write their thoughts. I can get it out with games and hands on things, but when it comes time to write it out - that's where a lot of my disabilities present themselves," she explained.

Another participant, Lisa, reported having "a lot of luck with different OT (occupation therapy) strategies". She describes one activity called pushing clouds:

I've kind of changed it for kids, but you cross midline and there are some breathing exercises that go with it. It's a very calming activity but because you're crossing midline, you're stimulating a lot. It helps the children focus; I've had kids doing something very challenging and they'll stop and say 'Mrs. M, I think I need to push clouds for a few minutes before I do this, I'm having trouble,' and when kids ask for a strategy, it's working.

Participants were also asked about strategies that regular education teachers use to aid students with learning disabilities and responses were vague. Jennifer stated that while they provide accommodations for the students such as addition/multiplication charts and read text for the students, "it's hard for them [regular education teachers] to know how to get them [students with learning disabilities] there." Nicole responded that while every teacher has their own

strategies they are comfortable with, "it is important not to get stuck on one way of teaching. Some teachers are set in their ways and are not flexible". Being open to new things is important as an inclusion teacher.

Modification Another method the participants discussed to help students with learning disabilities succeed in the general education curriculum was assignment modification. Special education teachers believe that modifying assignments levels the playing field for struggling students. Many teachers, including two of the participants, modify assignments ahead of time. They decide based on their knowledge of the students' perceived capabilities what the students will likely struggle with and either provide extra assistance or delete the task all together.

When asked to define inclusion in her own words, Lisa described it as one setting in which all students are taught the same material with additional personnel, accommodations, and "if needed, modifications". When explaining what she felt students need in order to be successful in an inclusion classroom, she briefly mentioned this idea again stating that teachers need to have "a willingness to make changes for the students when necessary, but also a willingness to allow them to fail at times so that you don't over accommodate for them just because they're in special education." Lisa later explained that she challenges her students because if not challenged, they will not grow. She felt that some people tend to accommodate and modify for struggling students to the point they receive unjustified As:

Unfortunately there is a tendency with a lot of people to say "well that kid is SPED, we can't expect very much out of them". I really have to work through that mental/emotional roadblock with them [teachers/parents] because some of them [students] are very accustomed to that by the 3rd grade. They have to be pushed out of that, but once they get pushed out of it, it's a freeing experiencing for them.

Experiences

What are special education teachers' experiences with the inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the regular education classroom? To gain a better understanding of their perceptions and realities of inclusion, participants were asked about personal experiences regarding full inclusion. While not all participants preferred inclusion over the traditional pull out model of special education, all seemed content teaching inclusion after several years and I wanted to know more about their journey along the way. Participants talked about necessities for successful inclusion experiences and things they felt hindered either the students' success and/or the relationship with the regular education teacher which indirectly affects students' success. Responses were grouped into the following two categories, *Facilitating Factors* and *Obstacles*.

Facilitating Factors Throughout the research process it became evident that are certain components, or aspects, of the relationship with co-teachers and the environment that need to be present in order for students and teachers alike to have a successful inclusion experience. This idea was confirmed throughout the interview process. Factors frequently mentioned were mutual respect, trained personnel, staying with the same teacher(s) and students daily, classroom management skills, and structure. "The most important thing would be two teachers working together," Nicole commented. "The most success is in the rooms where the general education teacher welcomed me and we worked together planning for every child." Jennifer expanded on this by saying:

I think you have to have a teacher that is very flexible... both teachers need to be flexible... I think you have to a give and take relationship because you have to be able to collaborate and let go of some control and realize these aren't *your students* or *my students*, these are *our students* and we both want them to be the best that they can be.

All three of participants spoke of student growth and felt that student success and academic achievement could be, at least somewhat, contributed to the inclusion experience. "I had a student that went from .3 reading level to a 2.0 this year!" exclaimed Jennifer. "I think the growth is just unbelievable in students. It has helped me to have higher expectations of students, not that I had low expectations before, but now I can see more of what they really can do..." she continued.

Surprisingly all three participants felt supported by administration. "I am fortunate to have a principal that listens to my concerns and takes my recommendations in consideration." Nicole stated. Lisa and Jennifer expressed the same sentiment describing their administrator as "very open to the inclusion experience and... supportive of us". Lisa also commented that administration plays a large role in the success of inclusion due to importance in choosing regular education inclusion teachers saying "you can't force someone to be an inclusion teacher because they won't do a good job."

Obstacles A lack of common planning time, the need for resource classrooms, and preconceived notions were among some of the obstacles the participants have faced while implementing inclusion. These obstacles make relationship with the co-teacher/administration and student success difficult because of added stress.

Both Jennifer and Lisa stated that one obstacle they have faced this year in particular was their schedule. Each of these teachers and their assistants worked with seven different regular education teachers and seven classrooms full of students. This prevented them from forming meaningful relationships with the students and gaining a "keen understanding of their strengths and weaknesses" because less time was spent with each child and they weren't able to observe all three subjects: math, reading, and English.

Jennifer, Lisa, and Nicole all mentioned the general education teacher when describing obstacles they have experienced since the transition to inclusion; it is important to note that all felt they now have good relationships with the general education teacher, but it has taken time for the special education teacher to be welcomed, respected, and viewed as a teacher in the general education classrooms. Nicole explained that it can be uncomfortable having to plan around another teacher and then rely on them for her success. She also stated that “some general education teachers have the mindset that students with an IEP are the SPED teacher’s problem”. Jennifer had a different experience:

I think a lot of times obstacles can be people’s ideas of inclusion and maybe they don’t want, umm not they, but some general education teachers (slight pause) want all the control and they are afraid to let someone in. They feel like they are responsible for the students where really both teachers are responsible.

Lisa brought up the fact a couple of times that she is an “odd teacher” and that she feels regular education teachers perceive her as a “nut job” but she does not care what they think as long her students are learning. The biggest obstacle she has had to overcome is the need for a separate classroom specifically for lower functioning students. “It is really a challenge to modify for a child who is functionally at a kindergarten reading level but in a third/fourth grade classroom and allow them to feel okay about themselves and participate without their peers noticing the difference...” When asked if there was anything else she would like to know about her experiences she replied that inclusion can be very positive if the right attitude is taken, however:

It can also be a nightmare when the regular education teachers see the SPED teacher as coming in as some sort of “glorified aid” and want them to make copies do busy work for them like grading papers while they [regular education teacher] teach. Some basically see

us as an aide in the room and that's very demeaning. It doesn't benefit the children because you are not there as a special education teacher to be an aide. In my experiences, some are also not willing to take input from the SPED teacher regarding adaptations, they are even sometimes resistant to accommodations that are in the IEP which are legally required because they have the old fashioned notion that "you can treat every kid the same and they're really not disabled, we've just made excuses for them". Having that kind of teacher in an inclusion setting is negative for the kids and the teacher involved.

Chapter 5

Summary, Discussion, and Recommendations

Chapter five presents a discussion of the study's results, answers the research questions, addresses limitations that were encountered, and discusses recommendations for this research project as well as future projects. There is also a discussion of the relationship among the data gathered and the literature in chapter two. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of special education teachers' perceptions regarding how students with learning disabilities learn in the general education classroom and the teacher's experiences since transitioning from resource classrooms to full inclusion.

Summary of Findings

This research project was conducted in order to obtain answers to the following two research questions:

- 1) What are special education teachers' perceptions of the way students learn in inclusive settings?
- 2) What are special education teachers' experiences with the inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the regular education classroom?

A summary of the findings for each question follows.

Research Question One

Participants described several different teaching strategies they use to help students with learning disabilities experience success in inclusive settings. They felt students needed to be able to move, touch, hear, and see things in order to learn; one participant reported that many traditional teaching styles do not captivate the interest of students with learning disabilities and therefore the students do not grasp the lessons taught. Modifying student work was also

discussed during the interviews although participants had differing views on how it should be done. One participant felt that regular education and special education teachers over modify assignments for students lowering their expectations for them. The other two felt modifications were needed in order for students to succeed.

Research Question Two

After experiencing both service delivery models – inclusion and pullout resource – only one participant stated they preferred teaching inclusion without hesitation. One participant felt more effective as a resource teacher because she had the opportunity to know her students' strengths, weaknesses, and behaviors better. The other participant felt it depended on the students and the regular education teacher, stating that she had worked with teachers in which they “clicked” and with others who made her “dread going into their room”.

Participants reported having supportive administrators, the need for mutual respect among co-teachers, and felt regular education teachers needed to have the “right attitude” and an “our student” mindset. Participants also discussed obstacles they have faced since the transition to inclusion including being perceived as “glorified aides”, being forced to work with teachers that were unwelcoming and unaccommodating to students with disabilities, and struggling to meet the needs of lower functioning students in the general education curriculum.

Discussion of Results and Conclusion

The findings of this study show that special education teachers perceive students with disabilities to learn in a multitude of ways. No one strategy or method will work for every child and what may work for a child one time, may not the next. Participants reported that a great deal of time with each student was needed in order to know how best to serve their needs because each child has their own learning style. The findings also suggest that most students

academically and behaviorally perform better in the inclusion classroom. As one participant reported, her expectations for students had increased since the transition to inclusion because she saw that most students could actually master grade level curriculum and without much difficulty as long as it was taught in a manner that the students were receptive to.

The findings also revealed that participants encountered many hurdles while transitioning from full time resource classrooms in which students with disabilities were segregated for a large portion of the day to including them in the general education classroom and curriculum 100% of the time. Participants reported that many regular education teachers had portrayed an “your student – my student” mindset meaning that while special education students were on their class roster, they were still the special education teacher’s “problem” as one participant stated.

Lisa sometimes felt perceived as a “glorified aide” because the regular education teacher repeatedly asked her to grade paper, make copies, and do other busy work undermining her expertise and authority as a special education teacher. This perception coincides with Tankersley & Cook’s (2007) study in which their participants remarked, “You used to be the CEO and now they don’t let you sit at the conference table” (p. 6) and the feeling of being “powerless in their roles in inclusion classrooms” (p. 6).

All three participants recommended that a continuum of services continue to be offered because inclusion does not meet the needs of all students. Unfortunately all students are placed in the general education classroom because there is not a separate placement designed for them. They discussed the difficulty a child experiences that is functioning two and three years below grade level in an elementary classroom to not only be included in the curriculum and experience success, but also to be accepted by his or her peers without criticism. Danne, Beirne-Smith, and Latham (2000), Ratcliff (2007), and Vaughn and Schumm (1995) concur with this idea.

Inclusion models should provide a continuum of services because “not all students will succeed academically and socially when placed in the general education classroom full time” (Vaughn & Schumm, 1995, p. 268).

Participants found that students' improved self-confidence, academic growth, and feeling of “being a part of something [class/peers]” contributed to successful inclusion experiences. New friendships with co-teachers and becoming a stronger teacher were also reported as unexpected benefits for themselves.

Much like Leatherman's 2007 study in which all eight participating early childhood inclusion teachers reported administrative support which contributed to their sense of success, the three special education teachers interviewed for the current study felt supported by their principals. They remarked that administrators were open to suggestions and recommendations and were genuinely interested in how things were going regarding inclusion.

It should also be noted that there were many limitations that affected the results of this study. Data was gathered from a limited number of participants from within the same rural school district. More participants would have yielded more data. Likewise, teachers who had taught inclusion for more than four years would have different perceptions than my participants. Special education teachers from other geographic areas would likely yield different results as different systems have access to varying resources and support. This particular study is also limited in data providing sources. Although observation of professional development opportunities and document analysis was planned, the in-service was rescheduled outside the research project. Research for this study was limited to two semesters during graduate school; a longer timeframe would have allowed the researcher to interview more participants and set-up secondary interviews to gain access to richer data.

In conclusion, based on the results of the study, special education teachers' perceptions of students with learning disabilities changed during the transition to inclusion. While there isn't any one particular way in which students with learning disabilities learn, they do learn. Not only that, they are capable of comprehending grade level curriculum with their nondisabled peers when the material is presented in a way that is conducive to their learning style. The results also show that special education teachers' experiences regarding inclusion vary from teacher to teacher and depend greatly on the relationship that is formed with the regular education teachers in which they co-teach.

Recommendations

The participants in this study support Vaughn and Schumm's (1995) responsible inclusion practice guidelines. All three participants suggested that a continuum of services be offered to meet the needs of the students, not the desires of the system. While all three talked about unsuccessful relationships with past regular education teachers, one participant explicitly stated, "You can't force someone to be an inclusion teacher because they won't do a good job." This statement corresponds directly with Vaughn and Schumm's suggestion that teachers volunteer to be in inclusion classrooms because even if they are not knowledgeable of learning disabilities, they would at least be willing to learn which fosters a positive attitude. By participating in this research project, participants were given the opportunity to have their voice heard and hopefully someday remedy the two above mentioned recommendations regarding the implementation of inclusion practices in our system. This study can provide our local educational system with a better understanding of the successes and obstacles teachers face in implementing full inclusion and in teaching students with learning disabilities in the general education classroom.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your current teaching position.
2. What area(s) of education are you certified to teach? Did you intend to teach children with special needs?
3. How many years did you teach special education in resource settings? Inclusive settings?
4. How would you define inclusion?
5. How would you define learning disabilities?
6. What are some typical characteristics of students with learning disabilities?
7. Based on your own personal experiences, what benefits do you see for included students with learning disabilities?
8. What would you consider necessary for successful inclusion of students with learning disabilities into general education classrooms?
9. What do you perceive as obstacles to successful inclusion for your students with learning disabilities?
10. Have you experienced any effects of inclusion that you did not expect? Tell me about them.
11. In your personal experiences, has the inclusion of students with learning disabilities affected your professional life in ways you did not expect?
12. Has teaching inclusion affected your personal life in ways you did not expect?
13. How has the inclusion of students with learning disabilities changed the lives of other students in ways you may not have expected?
14. In which setting did you feel more effective as a special education teacher and why?
15. If you could design and implement your own inclusion model, describe it for me.
16. As a special education teacher, do you feel students with learning disabilities require more attention than other students in the classroom?
17. Based on your observations, do you feel that included students are truly integrated into the general education classroom?
18. Based on your own personal experiences, how have achievement levels of students with learning disabilities changed since the transition to inclusion?
19. How can special education teachers meet the needs of students with learning disabilities in the general education classroom?
 - a. What instructional strategies do you use?
20. Describe your teaching relationship with the regular education teacher.
21. How do regular education teachers meet the needs of these students?
22. What instructional strategies do they use?
 - a. What type of instructional strategies do you feel regular education teachers lack in teaching children with learning disabilities, if any?
23. Based on your own experiences, how does your administrator support you as a special education teacher?

Appendix B

IRB Approval Form

RESEARCH REVIEW COVER SHEET
TTU Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

FORM A
Ref
5/3/13

- If research is exempt submit 1 copy of Forms A & C to Department or Unit Review committee/designee for approval. If items with an asterisk are marked on this form, 1 copy of Form B should also be submitted. If approved by department, the signed original should then be sent to the Office of Research at Campus Box 5036 or Derryberry Hall Room 306.
- If research is not exempt, obtain signature of Dept. Review Comm. Chair or Designee, complete Form B and submit along with Forms A & C and other required information (e.g., Informed Consent) to the Office of Research for either Expedited Review (1 copy of materials) or Full Review (14 copies of materials).

Note: The Principal Investigator cannot sign in the boxes below
The research described herein is in compliance with ONE of the three available criteria below:

↓ Certification of Exempt Research ↓	Requires Expedited Review	Requires Full Review
Exempt Research to be signed by Dept. Review Comm. Chair or Designee (other than faculty supervisor)	Expedited _____	Full Review _____
Name <u>Lisa Zagunay</u>	The Research described herein requires full or expedited review as indicated above and will be submitted to the IRB. ▼ Signed by Dept. Review Comm. Chair or Designee	
Signature <u>Lisa Zagunay</u> Date <u>4/18/13</u>	Signature _____	Date _____

APPROVED

Subject recruitment and data collection may not be initiated prior to formal written approval (return of stamped copy) from the IRB on Human Subjects

If not submitting Form B, attach a description of your project (Please refer to Attachment for Form A)

Project Title: Perceptions of Elementary Special Education Teachers Regarding Inclusion of Students with Learning Disabilities

Objectives/Hypotheses: The purpose of this study is to explore special education teachers' perceptions of inclusion for children with learning disabilities.

Principal Investigator (PI): Kimberly Goad

Title (e.g. Student, Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, etc.) Student

If student, attach a copy of the certificate showing that you have completed the human subjects portion (Section 6) of the research ethics training course (This course may be accessed at: www.tntech.edu/research/resources).

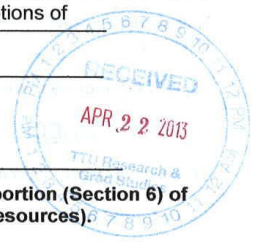
If student, name of your faculty advisor for this project?: Jason Beach

If student, your faculty advisor's email address: jbeach@tntech.edu

PI's Department: Curriculum and Instruction

PI's Email: kgoad@k12tn.net

PI's Mailing Address: (Campus or Home): 6518 Carthage Rd, Pleasant Shade, TN 37145



Co-Investigators (If needed, list additional investigators on separate sheet)

1. _____ Student _____ Faculty _____ Dept _____
2. _____ Student _____ Faculty _____ Dept _____

Projected Dates of Study Start: on approval End: Dec. 2013

Probable Review Category a. Exempt: b. Expedited: _____ c. Full Board Review _____
Attach project description

Category for Exempt Research (check one): 1 _____ 2 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____

Funding Status a. Not Funded b. Funded _____ c. Funding Pending _____ Funding Source: _____

1. Existing Data: Will this study involve the use of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens if not publicly available?

No Yes If yes, attach documentation indicating the authorization to access the data

2. Subjects

(Check all that apply): Describe on Separate Page if necessary

- a. Adults (18+ years)
- b. Children & Minors (under 18)
In an educational setting
* Outside an educational setting
- c.* Cognitively Impaired Persons
- d.* Prisoners
- e. Elderly/Aged Persons
- f. Minorities
- g. * Institutionalized Persons
- h. Students (Describe) _____ Describe: _____
- i.* Others (Describe) _____ Describe: _____

3. Data will include (Check all that apply):

- a.* names of people _____
- b.* addresses _____
- c.* phone numbers _____
- d. age
- e. gender
- f. ethnicity
- g. marital status _____
- h. income _____
- i.* social security number _____
- j.* job title _____
- k.* names of employers _____
- l. types of employers _____
- m.* other unique or sensitive information _____

4. Will a list linking codes to identifying information be maintained? Yes No

5. How will privacy be maintained? _____ will provide pseudonyms, locked file cabinet, and password protected computer

6. Written Informed Consent? Yes No

7. Is compensation offered? Yes No

8. Number of human subjects 33

9. Method of recruiting subjects purposeful sampling; request volunteers

10. Will subject be involved in deception?: Yes* No

CHECK ALL THAT APPLY FOR ITEMS 11-16 (Specify on separate page, if needed)

11. Method Used: Interview Survey/Questionnaire Observations Experimental Other

12. Potential Risk Exposure: *Physical *Psychological *Economic *Legal *Social None

13. Instruments

- a. standardized tests _____
- b. survey/ questionnaire _____
- c. interview
- d. equipment (specify) _____
- e. other (specify) _____

14. Recorded by

- a. written notes
- b. audio tape
- c.* video tape/film _____
- d. *photograph _____
- e. electronic media

15. Administered by

- a. in person (group) _____
- b. in person (individual)
- c. telephone _____
- d. electronic mail
- e. mail _____

16. Findings Used For

- a. publication _____
- b. evaluation _____
- c. course requirement
- d. thesis/dissertation _____
- e. other (specify) _____

document analysis & field note

If any asterisk is checked, then complete Form B (even if Exempt)

Principal Investigator[‡]: Kimberly Good Kimberly Good 4-5-13
name/signature/date

Faculty Supervisor[‡]: (if student research) Jason Beach Jason Beach 4/16/13
name/signature/date

[‡] In signing this, I certify that I have completed the human subjects portion (Section 6) of the research ethics training course.

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NOTE

If not submitting a Form B, attach a description of your project describing methodology, confidentiality, etc. A template for this information may be found in 'Attachment for Form A'.

Appendix C**Participant Consent Form**

RESEARCH: Special Education Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusion

INVESTIGATOR: [REDACTED], student, Tennessee Tech University

I am asking you to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to explore special education teachers' perceptions of inclusive educations for elementary aged children. I especially want to know what your ideas and thoughts are regarding full inclusion of children seven to ten years old with learning disabilities. The information I gather from you will help educators understand more about special education students and the ways they learn.

At least three special education inclusion teachers will be interviewed. You will be interviewed at least once with a follow up interview or email if necessary. Each interview will last about an hour. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to answer questions and talk about your experiences with various models of inclusion and co-teaching. Observations of professional development regarding inclusion that you participate in will be observed as well.

This research will take place between May 2013 and August 2013, and all interviews and observations will take place during that time. There are no foreseeable risks for you in participating in this research. No compensation will be provided.

Information gathered about you for this study will be kept private, available only to me. Computer records and printed records will be secured in password protected or locked files and only I will be able to access them. Your name will not be used in any written results of my work. Instead, a pseudonym will be assigned to you.

Your participation in my research is your choice. By signing this statement, you are volunteering to participate in my research. However, you may choose at any time to discontinue your participation, and any information gathered for the research will be used in the study.

If at any time you have questions about the research or about your rights you may contact me by phone at 615-699-3791, by email at k[REDACTED]@k12tn.net, or by mail at 6518 Carthage Rd, Pleasant Shade, TN, 37145. You also may contact Jason Beach at Tennessee Technological University at (931) 372-3069 or jbeach@tntech.edu.

I have read and understand the information provided on this page. _____ (initial)

(continued on back side)

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPANT

I agree to participate in [REDACTED]'s research study. I have read the information in this document, and I understand that I can change my mind about participating in this research, without penalty, at any time.

I do not agree to participate in [REDACTED]'s research study.

Today's Date _____

Print Name _____

Signature _____

Email _____

RESEARCHER'S SIGNATURE

Today's Date _____

Print Name _____

Signature _____