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ABSTRACT

This monograph describes results of focus group interviews with 53 regular and special education teachers in Tennessee concerning their experience with inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education classrooms. An introduction notes the trend toward inclusion of students with disabilities in regular programs while providing needed special educational support services. Focus group findings indicated that teachers' concerns covered the areas of staff, time, support/commitment, student ratios, role definition, providing meaningful instruction, training, academic standards, funding, and parent conferences. Obstacles and barriers identified by the teachers concerned negative attitudes, lack of training, classroom disruptions, and lack of planning time and funding. Essential factors in successful inclusion included support from administrators, teachers, and parents; adequate funding; and teacher training. Effective strategies/practices were categorized into instructional approaches, management strategies, and attitudes. Participants also noted the effects of inclusion on the classroom climate and reported that the most meaningful inservice training involved teachers visiting successful inclusion programs. The most frequent suggestion for improving teacher preservice training was to increase the number and duration of practicum experiences. Among six recommendations were development of a comprehensive implementation plan prior to beginning an inclusion program and providing teachers with adequate time to plan collaboratively. The interview protocol is appended. (DB)

Concerns About and Effective Strategies for Inclusion: Focus Group Interview Findings from Tennessee Teachers

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AEL's mission is to link the knowledge from research with the wisdom from practice to improve teaching and learning. AEL serves as the Regional Educational Laboratory for Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. For these same four states, it operates both a Regional Technology Consortium and the Eisenhower Regional Consortium for Mathematics and Science Education. In addition, it serves as the Region IV Comprehensive Center and operates the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools.

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Nan Crawford, Tennessee Department of Education

Linda Hollifield, Tennessee Department of Education

Pat Kircher, Davidson County Metro Nashville Schools

Genevieve DePriest, Memphis City Schools

Elizabeth Padgett, Unicoi County Schools

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Focus group interview locations were selected for their proximity to the educators nominated for participation. AEL staff realize that not all educators with experience in inclusion were nominated for participation and that many nominated could not attend. AEL recognizes the time and effort devoted to sharing insights about inclusion by the following 53 experienced educators at the Jackson (May 3, two interviews), Nashville (May 4, two interviews), and Knoxville (May 5, one interview) focus group interviews:

Dorothy Alcala, Davidson County Schools

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Susan Zenick, Davidson County Metro Nashville Schools

INTRODUCTION

Since the passage of federal legislation (the Rehabilitation Act of 1973; the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94-142 in 1975; and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] in 1990), both special educators and regular educators have carefully examined the relationships between their programs and services to children. During this period, the emphasis in practice has shifted from mainstreaming (the selective placement of special education students in one or more "regular" education classes based upon the student's ability to "keep up" with the class) to inclusion (the commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend). In effect, inclusion involves bringing special education services to the child (as opposed to enrolling them in pull-out programs) and requiring only that the child benefit from a regular education placement rather than "keep up" with the class (Rogers, 1993). Throughout the years since the passage of IDEA, the interpretation of "least restrictive environment" has evolved in response to parent and child advocate pressures, increased research, and creation of technologies and methods for adaptive learning.

Several states, including all states in AEL's Region, have responded to federal mandates by creating policies, regulations, or guidelines to recommend progression toward inclusion for the education of special needs children. As these changes are carried out at the local level, some regular education teachers have experienced appropriate professional development, special educator or aide assistance in the classroom, caps on the size of classes enrolling special education students, and involvement in development of student Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and/or placement conferences conducted for their special education students.

But reform accompanied by support has not been the rule in all districts or schools. Many teachers have complained of the absence of these supports and have described "horror" stories of inappropriate placements and classroom disruptions after the introduction of special education students (Baines, L., Baines, C., and Masterson, C., 1994; Rogers, 1993; Virginia Education Association, 1993; West Virginia Federation of Teachers/AFT, 1994). While special educators also need assistance in developing collaborative working arrangements with others, regular or general educators (as they are sometimes referred to in the literature) who often have no or little training in special education, need information on strategies effective with special education students (West Virginia Federation of Teachers/AFT, 1994; Virginia Education Survey of Special Education Issues, 1993).

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

AEL's Classroom Instruction program has worked with and for teachers since 1985 to involve them in research and development efforts that build on current research and the wisdom of practice in "hot" topic areas. Inclusion has been such a "hot" topic since enactment of the initial federal legislation designed to provide a free and appropriate education for all children with disabilities (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, P.L. 94-142, 1975) was enacted, challenged in the courts, sustained, and reinforced through more recent legislation (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 1990; and the Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA], 1990).

The broad interpretation of IDEA's "least restrictive environment" has allowed children with disabilities, previously secluded into separate education programs staffed by specialists, to participate in the mainstream educational program and the everyday lives of Americans through accommodations such as handicapped access to buildings and transportation, signing of speeches and performances, instructional modifications for individual students, and peer tutoring. Moving students with disabilities into regular classes as the first placement (with pull-out programs and additional assistance within the classroom provided "as needed") has changed instruction for these students, their teachers, and their classmates. This study sought to identify the problems/concerns and the effective strategies associated with inclusion that have been discovered by some regular and special educators experienced with inclusion in each state of AEL's Region (Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia). Since the study was a qualitative examination of teacher perceptions, focus group interviews were selected as an appropriate methodology.

Objectives for the study were as follows:

- Provide focus group interview opportunities for special and regular educators experienced with inclusion to express concerns about associated classroom problems and to share descriptions of strategies they have found effective;
- Increase teacher awareness of strategies effective for helping special education students in regular (general) education classes;
- Develop state summaries and a Regional summary of identified obstacles and strategies useful in helping special education students in regular classes.

Concerns about and Effective Strategies for Inclusion: Focus Group Interview Findings from Tennessee Teachers reports the study procedures, results, conclusions, and recommendations developed from analysis of data from the five focus group interviews

conducted by AEL in the state. For educators assisting teachers, the report provides an orientation to the concerns of teachers who are experienced with inclusion. This document and, more particularly, its companion report *Teacher Perceptions of and Strategies for Inclusion: A Regional Summary of Focus Group Interview Findings*, provide numerous effective strategies contributed by focus group participants for use in readers' schools and classrooms. Finally, recommendations included in both reports can help administrators and teachers at every level in implementing inclusion as a systemic and beneficial process for all. **For further information on the study, or to acquire summary reports from focus groups in other states of AEL's Region or additional resources on inclusion, contact the Distribution Center, AEL, P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325; 800/624-9120; or http://www.ael.org.**

STUDY PROCEDURES

AEL's Classroom Instruction program director, Jane Hange, contacted individuals in organizations that have traditionally collaborated with AEL who hold a state perspective on the issue to present the project and to request cooperation in the identification of teachers most experienced with inclusion who could discuss their concerns/questions and effective classroom strategies. In Tennessee, staff of the Tennessee Department of Education special education division at the state and regional levels, the president of the Tennessee Education Association (largest teacher association in the state), and supervisors in the two largest metropolitan school systems recommended 91 regular and special education teachers who had one or more years of experience with inclusion. AEL staff sent invitations to all for focus group interview participation in interviews to be held May 3 in Jackson (2), May 4 in Nashville (2), and May 5 in Knoxville (1). If more than two educators were nominated for a school, those nominated were asked to determine who among them would comprise the special educator/regular educator pair to represent the school. The 53 participants in the five Tennessee interviews included the following at each of the three sites: Jackson (11 in a.m. session, 7 in p.m.), Nashville (13-a.m., 9-p.m.), and Knoxville (13-one session only). Each session involved special education teachers (28 total) and regular education teachers (25 total) representing elementary and secondary levels. A total of 16 sessions, including a field test of the interview questions, were held with 144 participants throughout the Region.

Each tape-recorded focus group interview involved discussion of 10 questions (see Interview Protocol, Appendix) and required approximately three hours. Greg Leopold, of AEL's Planning, Research, and Evaluation division and Jane Hange, Classroom Instruction program director, alternately led interviews and assisted with field notes and facilitation. Round-trip mileage and a light lunch were provided as incentives. Also, teachers were invited to bring descriptions of strategies they found effective in assisting special education students. These strategies were discussed at the conclusion of each interview and all participants were mailed a compilation of the strategies from sessions held at their interview site. Each participant, and those who recommended educators, will receive a copy of this report and the Regional summary of findings.

RESULTS

This section discusses the major findings from the five Tennessee focus group interviews. Each of the interview questions (see Appendix) is used as a heading to direct the reader's attention throughout the results. Conclusions and recommendations based on the data are offered in subsequent sections. Few differences were noted between responses of special educators and those of regular educators. Where important to the meaning of a statement, the role of the educator is noted.

Concerns

The concerns expressed by focus group members included:

- lack of adequate staff
- inadequate planning time for teachers
- lack of commitment to inclusion on the part of administrators, teachers, and parents
- high ratios of special education students to regular education students in some classes
- role definition issues
- providing meaningful instruction for all students
- lack of training
- establishing academic standards
- funding
- introduction of inclusion within the district
- parent conferences
- potential for "labeling" for children with disabilities

Staff. The most frequent concern mentioned by group participants was the lack of adequate staff to implement inclusion successfully. Teachers repeatedly described the impact of including special education students in regular classes in terms of increased workload. The need to identify disparate student needs and develop a variety of instructional modifications often results in frustration and may lead to professional burnout. This situation is especially problematic for regular education teachers who do not feel adequately prepared for instructing special education students or who are not wholly committed to the inclusion concept.

Time. Time for planning, both alone and in collaboration with co-teachers, was the second most frequently mentioned concern of the focus group participants. Not only does the need for planning increase with each special education student added to a classroom, but inclusion requires cooperative planning between the special education teacher, regular classroom teacher and, if appropriate, the teaching assistant. Oftentimes teachers, especially at the elementary level, are allotted only one brief period a week for planning. Focus group members reported having little or no time to "work out teaching styles" or "to come up with (instructional) modifications that would readily help." In fact, one teacher confessed, "I go days and weeks without planning."

Support/commitment. Another primary concern of focus group participants was the lack of "buy in" or commitment on the part of administrators and regular education teachers. In some districts, inclusion is voluntary which results in a few willing teachers carrying the entire special education load for their grade level. Such a workload imbalance is detrimental to the inclusion effort as teachers may become overburdened, resentful, and discouraged.

Some administrators and teachers, appear to have implemented inclusion in name only. For example, while regular education teachers may accept special education students into their classes, some refuse to accept responsibility for their instruction, placing the load solely on the special education teacher or classroom assistant. To remedy this situation, one group participant stated, "Commissioners and superintendents need to take a stance and decide this is what they're going to do." Another added, the "inclusion must be an integral part of the overall philosophy of the system."

Student ratios. Special education participants described the difficulties for the special education teacher who must work with a large number of special education students in a variety of classes with different regular education teachers. The situation maybe compounded if the special education teacher is accustomed to teaching one-on-one or in small resource classes. These teachers reported finding the challenge of inclusion to be overwhelming. In addition to working with included special education students, these teachers may also be responsible for the continued operation of pull-out programs.

Role definition. Clarification of roles of special and regular educators was another identified area of concern. In some cases, special education teachers are unsure of their function in an inclusive setting. Ideally, the two teachers form a collaborating partnership and coteach and function as an instructional team that plans together and serves all students in the classroom.

Role conflict between coteachers was complicated, according to some participants, by feelings of "classroom ownership." Often friction resulted as special education teachers expected to be included as equals in "their" classroom and the regular education teachers felt imposed upon. At the same time, some special educators described being very protective of their students and having difficulty sharing their care and education with others. One group member proposed a simple yet significant means of reducing the territory problem. She suggested that the coteachers agree to have both their names placed above the classroom door prior to the opening of school to communicate equality in the classroom.

Reported consequences of teachers not working cooperatively included a case where the regular education teachers found it difficult to surrender control in the classroom and the special education teacher assumed the role of a classroom aide. Another case involved a situation where a teaching assistant was assigned to a classroom where the regular teacher failed to participate in planning for the instruction of special education students. The assistant was forced to assume the primary responsibility for special education students' instruction.

Providing meaningful instruction. In addition to role issues, some participants described regular education teachers' uncertainty about their abilities when confronted with integrating students with a variety of disabilities into their classrooms. One teacher stated, "There are extreme levels among students. My concern is how to meet everyone's needs. My whole class helps in the inclusion program, but I'm not giving what I think I should be giving."

Training. Both regular education and special education teachers view the lack of training/preparation as a problem. One teacher admitted wondering, "I wasn't trained for this. Am I capable?" This concern was reflected in many participants' requests to require inservice for teachers who are planning on implementing inclusion classes.

Establishing academic standards. Regular education teachers were concerned that academic expectations may be lowered and the learning atmosphere of the class disrupted by special education students. Apprehension was described as strongest during the initial stages of the inclusion experience. In some cases, focus group participants related how they were concerned about the reaction of regular education students when they were held to more rigorous standards than their special education classmates. Generally, these fears were alleviated with time. Participants stated that most frequently regular education students seemed to understand the need for modifications in the classroom and often become peer tutors to special education students.

Funding. Resources to support inclusion were a major concern of members of all focus group interviews in the state. Adequate funding is required for additional staff, appropriate training, and necessary instructional materials.

Introduction of inclusion. At least two group members were concerned with the sequence in which inclusion was introduced in a school district. They believed that it is important to begin including special education students at the early grades and to expand the practice to higher grade levels as the students progress through the system. One teacher expressed concern that elementary students who had participated in an inclusion setting would experience difficulty when they transitioned to a middle school where inclusion not available. Likewise, another teacher commented that initiating inclusion at the secondary level while not having it at the elementary level was counterproductive.

Parent conferences. Participants reported that teachers who are unaccustomed to dealing with parents of disabled students may lack confidence in discussions with parents who have trouble accepting their child's disability.

Potential for labeling. A few participants were also concerned that the attention given special needs children within regular education classrooms would result in negative "labeling" of the child among the other students.

Obstacles/Barriers

The following obstacles and barriers to implementing inclusion programs were identified by focus group respondents:

- negative attitudes of teachers, parents, and students
- lack of training
- classroom disruptions
- lack of planning time
- lack of funding

Negative attitudes. The obstacle or barrier perceived to be most significant to the successful implementation of inclusion was negative attitudes of faculty and administration. Focus group participants described resistance they faced from their principals, regular education teachers, and even special education teachers. At least two group members reflected that their

school administrators, while not actively opposing inclusion, considered the practice a low priority. Their attitudes were evident through benign neglect. In one instance, for example, the special education teacher was separated from the rest of the school by being assigned to a classroom in a remote location. The teacher got the message, "If I'm put over there, I won't be noticed." At another school, the school principal refused to assign special education students to regular classes until all regular education students were scheduled. This approach sent a clear message to all teachers about the lack of importance of inclusion, and made scheduling appropriate adult assistance for special education students difficult.

Participants reported that the attitude of inclusion being of secondary importance to the school program was not unique to school principals. In one situation, the director of a special education program pulled the teacher's assistant from the room each day to work one-on-one with a student to fulfill a parent request. This action demonstrated a lack of commitment to inclusion on the part of the special education director.

Participants noted that many regular and special education teachers oppose including special education students in regular education classrooms. Resistance to the practice varied from ignoring the special education teacher to simply refusing to participate in the program. A focus group participant related that in her school several regular education teachers "revolted" after six weeks, complaining that inclusion had been "crammed down their throats." The result was the termination of inclusion until a modified approach could be implemented.

Negative parent attitudes were described by several participants as barriers to inclusion. Parents of both regular education students and special education students had opposed the practice. One participant explained that her school faced opposition from a group of parents of gifted students who believed inclusion slowed the instructional pace and lowered standards for their regular education children. Another group member described parents of special education students who lacked confidence that their children would be able to keep up with the academics of the regular program. They feared losing the security of the special education program where students received individual attention.

Student attitudes can also be obstacles to including special education students in regular classrooms. Participants stated that the potential existed for regular education students to be unaccepting of their special education peers and for special education students to fear losing the "safety net" of special education. However, in their experience, after students became acquainted, the "problems seem to take care of themselves." In fact, according to one participant, regular education students can become too overprotective of their special education classmates, not providing them the freedom they need to become self-sufficient. Another participant related that one of her students reported tiring of peer tutoring responsibilities for a special education classmate.

Lack of training. Few participants reported they had received adequate preservice or inservice training to qualify them to work effectively in an inclusive setting. While some regular education teachers believed they lacked the knowledge to make the necessary modifications for special education students, many special education teachers reported initially feeling ill-prepared to teach in large group settings. Participants suggested that preservice and inservice training related to the needs of special education students and to modifying curriculum and instruction would help teachers alleviate their own concerns and those of administrators and parents. A substantial effort in this area would, in the opinion of group members, eliminate or reduce many of the other obstacles.

Classroom disruptions. The potential for classroom disruptions by special education students was a major concern of regular education teachers in the focus group interviews. Teachers reported disruptions were sometimes caused by students with behavior disorders and/or by regular education students when teachers were assisting special education students.

Planning time. The danger of overwork was very real to the teachers in the focus group. Participants reported that problems related to high student-teacher ratios in regular education classes were compounded with the addition of special education students. Planning for the individual needs of a diverse group of students is difficult and can be overwhelming. This is especially true if several students with varied disabilities are enrolled in one class. This situation frequently requires major modifications to lesson material, tests, and homework assignments.

The lack of planning time repeatedly was identified as an obstacle by group participants. Teacher schedules, especially at the elementary level, offered few if any opportunities for teachers to meet regularly for meaningful collaboration on instruction. Implementing an inclusion model designed to have teachers working together as equals in the classroom requires substantial and continuous opportunities to plan together. For inclusion to be successful, according to group members, such time is essential but often lacking.

Funding. An obstacle participants linked to the lack of qualified teachers and the opportunity to plan was the lack funds for inservice and adequate staff. Additional instructional staff to free teachers for planning and training requires funding, which is often not available, or creative class coverage methods not frequently arranged.

Essential Supports

Focus group members identified the following essential supports for successful inclusion programs:

- administrative, teacher, parent, and student support

- funding
- teacher training

Support. Continuing and visible support from the administrative staff was viewed as a key factor at those sites where inclusion had been most successful. Participants reported that school principals can make or break the practice of including special education students in regular classes. It was through the support of the principal that one special education teacher related how she "was finally accepted as a colleague" by the regular education faculty. In another school, the principal forced the issue of staff commitment by telling the faculty, "everyone has to buy in or don't do it." As a result, the faculty has been pulling together to make inclusion successful. Other methods used by principals to support inclusion were permitting students to enroll in age-appropriate classes and allowing students to attend their home school.

Although the school principal appeared to be the most important support provider among administrators, focus group participants mentioned other key central office supporters of inclusion such as coordinators and supervisors. One teacher commented that, "Our director has been very supportive, allowing us to fly and dig in and spend money." Another incentive provided by central office staff in support of inclusion was to reduce class size. In one district, administrators reduced class enrollments by counting special education students into the class formula at the same weight as regular education students. Traditionally, special education students are counted as a reduced class load due to the supplementary support they receive from the special education staff. Less concrete, but no less important, according to a teacher, are the central office staff who provide a "pat on the back when we need it."

A lack of parent support was presented as an obstacle by the group members. Therefore, the parents who are supportive of inclusion were viewed as extremely helpful to making it successful. One teacher, who experienced positive feedback from parents, noted that a regular education parent had commented, "This has been the best experience for my child."

Some of the strongest support for inclusion came from the parents of special education parents. A teacher related, "Parents fell in love with it (inclusion) and demanded it." Another teacher described how inclusion gives a family more status in the community than a segregated special education setting, which, in turn, strengthens parent support (even if the parent's child is "scared to death" about going into the regular classroom).

The support of regular education students toward special education students was described as extremely helpful, especially in classes where peer tutoring takes place. One teacher commented, "Students can work in small groups and grasp concepts quicker." Teachers reported that, in general, student attitudes toward their special needs classmates had been positive. A

teacher reflected on the inclusion experience, "All regular education students love to help special needs kids."

Participants viewed the support they receive from their colleagues as the most essential support for inclusion. Of primary importance are good working relationships between coteachers. Teachers willing to work as partners, share responsibilities, plan together, and accommodate each other's teaching styles were considered invaluable in the effort to implement inclusion. Participants also emphasized the importance of developing a network of colleagues, both internal and external to the school, that provides personal and professional support to inclusion teachers.

Funding. Money has been available for materials and training in some districts represented in the interviews. At one location, funds were provided for a resource center and teachers were given $800 and a computer to address student needs. Training through the Tennessee Department of Education and through videotapes from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development has been helpful to at least two group participants.

Effective Strategies/Practices

Strategies and practices identified as effective in an inclusive setting could be categorized into three areas: instructional approaches, management strategies, and attitudes.

Instructional Approaches. Several approaches, instructional techniques, and management strategies were offered by focus group members for working with special and regular education students in inclusion classes. The most commonly mentioned strategy was individualized instruction. Teachers stressed the importance of customizing instruction and materials to the learning styles and capabilities of each student.

Individualization of instruction meant modifications in a variety of areas. In general, all students were taught the same curriculum with the same goals, but with modifications based on their abilities. For example, students with reading difficulties were read to by the special education teacher or the teaching assistant. Students with hearing impairments were instructed in sign language. Teachers also provided students with differentiated homework and classwork assignments. For example, one teacher described a method of color coding assignments that indicates various levels of difficulty, and another described an adjusted grading system.

Modification of tests and exams was common. Most test modifications involved reducing the number of responses, reading tests aloud, or allowing students to leave the room to take the tests with the special education teacher.

Additional instructional measures for increasing the chances for success of special education students included:

- teaching students conflict resolution strategies
- providing multiage, multi-grade teaching of reading and math
- using developmentally appropriate multiage grouping
- involving special education students in a variety of classes for specific purposes (e.g., Math for academics, lunch for socialization)
- providing small group instruction (e.g., "jigsaw model"—students as members of "expert" groups teach each other)
- using cooperative learning groups with assigned roles (e.g., researcher, writer, presenter)
- pairing students
- having parent volunteers (e.g.,"VIP" Very Important Parent tutors)
- using peer tutoring (e.g., involving 8th grade students in tutoring 7th grade students or pairing marginally successful students with special education students)
- implementing "reverse inclusion" in which regular education students go to a special education classroom for assistance from a special education student
- developing a learning lab or resource room
- developing a program for teachers to provide tutoring
- implementing the open classroom concept
- using role playing in math (e.g., students make intentional errors on chalkboard examples so classmates can correct them)
- using flexible grouping in reading—students can join or leave the group at will
- teaching a study skills class

- providing a reward system (e.g., "Honor Badges", lunch out of school, special friend to visit, schoolwide recognition, eat lunch with teacher, awards day for special education students)

Management Strategies. The following organizational strategies were suggested by group participants to help collaborating teachers communicate and manage student information.

- record keeping (developing a status sheet for each student based on his/her IEP that notes modifications and recommendations and providing this sheet to each regular education teacher and special education service provider)

- pre-school preparation (meeting with special education and regular education teachers prior to the opening of school to review student IEPs, discuss disabilities, and develop modifications)

- "coffee and conversation" (allowing teaching assistants to cover the class one morning per week while teachers collaborate in planning for the upcoming week and discuss student needs)

Attitudes. Perhaps just as important as instructional techniques and information management approaches are the attitudes that prevail in the instructional setting. Several teachers agreed that a positive teacher attitude was a critical factor in helping special education students successfully participate in regular education classes. One teacher suggested that to start the year out right, coteachers are introduced as equal partners from first day, and "acceptance of special education students by the teachers so that regular education students will accept them."

Two teachers related how significant terminology can be. At one school, special education classes are referred to as multiage 4th-5th-6th grade classes. Modifications in curriculum and instruction are referred to as age-appropriate activities. In this way, older special education students are not singled out for participating in immature activities. A teacher commented that inviting curious regular education students into the classroom to learn what inclusion is about helped de-mystify it.

The regular education teachers' expectations influence how readily the regular education students will accept special education students. According to one secondary school teacher, the "students know I won't tolerate it (mistreating of special education students)." A second teacher reported that at the beginning of each year, she "gives a little speech" to convey the importance of accepting individual differences. Participants stated that a positive attitude toward all students should be communicated by teachers, even outside the classroom. A teacher offered, "It's not just the influence you have when you're standing in front of the class. It's the influence you

have in the hallway. If other teachers can tell that you have negative opinions towards children, you can be sure the kids know it."

To help regular education students and their parents understand the concept of disabilities, one teacher recommended a traveling puppet show with puppets representing disabled people. Presented at the beginning of the year to students and to parent groups, the show helped alleviate the misperceptions adults and young people have about special education students. Participants hoped that greater understanding would lead to a reduction in the resistance parents initially may have to the practice of inclusion.

Effects of Special Education Students on Class Climate

Focus group participants related instances where inclusion has had positive, negative, or negligible impacts on class climate. Much of the effect inclusion has on a class, they felt, was dependent on how well prepared the teachers are and their attitude toward the approach. In instances when the teachers were well prepared, knew what to expect, and considered the special education teacher as an equal partner in the classroom, special education students seemed to have a positive effect on the class climate or no discernable effect at all. In classes where regular education teachers willingly began to work with special education students, the regular education students also assisted. In some cases, the regular education students were unaware that their classmates had special needs. One teacher recalled an instance when a visitor asked a regular education student a question about the special students in the class and the student "didn't know what she was talking about."

Some teachers viewed inclusion as an opportunity for regular education students to learn about individual differences and to become more accepting of others. In fact, students may tend to "become mother hens" to their special needs classmates. This perception may in itself lead to problems if regular students begin to feel burdened with the role of caretaker.

Teachers also reported benefits from having a diverse group of students. One teacher stated, "It helps me as a regular teacher and as a parent. I've learned to be tolerant." Another added that inclusion forces changes in teaching styles that have resulted in improved learning in regular education students. This positive effect had been especially helpful to borderline students.

Focus group members did identify some negative effects of inclusion. One special education teacher believed that including special education students in a regular classroom diverted much needed attention away from the special education students. And the reverse held true in the opinion of other participants. "Children who act out take away from the instruction of

others" commented one teacher, while another admitted that she lowered her behavioral expectations for special students and that affected the entire class.

Difficulties were described that related to adding special education students when classrooms were overcrowded. And, at times regular education students are not always accepting of their special education peers. In most cases, however, attitudes improved as students became familiar with each other.

Helpful Inservice Training

The most meaningful inservice sessions, according to group members, involved teachers visiting successful inclusion programs. Teachers appreciated the opportunity to see their colleagues in action and question them about the practical aspects of serving special education students in the regular setting. They contended that a key to a successful inservice is practical "nuts and bolts" type of information rather than abstract theory. Many participants felt initial inservice needs to be aimed at creating awareness of various types of disabilities and should be followed by topics of specific interest to teachers with students of varying disabilities.

Teachers who attended professional conferences believed that the most valuable conference session involved teacher panels on the practical aspects of an inclusion classroom. Specific conference sponsors mentioned by participants included: the University or Memphis, Epilepsy Foundation, LRP Conference, and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

Material resources for training are often supplied through resource centers or the central office in local districts. One teacher recommended the Hawthorne Manuals, a set of books and a computer program for generating teaching strategies for specific student learning difficulties.

Recommendations for Teacher Preparation

The most frequent suggestion for improving teacher preservice training was to increase the number and duration of practicum experiences. Focus group participants proposed that both special education and regular education majors should be required to teach and observe in several special education and inclusion classrooms. Practicum experiences should begin early in the college program and culminate in a student teaching experience that is longer and more diverse than is presently required. Likewise, several participants suggested that short-term field experiences such as "shadowing" veteran teachers would be valuable for providing preservice teachers a general view of teaching requirements.

When discussing possible modifications to preservice education curriculum, participants suggested that course content should be interdisciplinary and should include topics such as the administration of medications, legal issues in special education, Individual Education Plans (IEP), inclusion, instructional modifications for special education students, problem solving, action research, and Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR). Although not all group members agreed, it was suggested that the preparation program for regular education and special education teachers be merged since "we're all special educators—we all teach special kids, whether they are labeled or not." One teacher proposed that all preservice teachers earn a liberal arts degree as an undergraduate and concentrate their efforts in education at the master's degree level as is the case in many five-year training programs.

Some focus group members contended that college professors lacked current practical knowledge of inclusion classrooms. It was suggested that "professors ought to be required to teach in an elementary, middle, and high school in their area because if you haven't been in the classroom in ten years, you don't know what the kids are like."

Finally, participants stated that the Tennessee Department of Education should have a role in preservice education for teachers. They suggested that the department expand sponsorship of inservice programs and conferences.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Barriers and concerns. The major factors influencing the successful implementation of inclusion of special needs children into regular education classrooms include: support and commitment, training, teacher planning time, and financial resources necessary to provide personnel training and instructional materials.

Several of the specific concerns and obstacles presented by focus group members are directly related to a lack of commitment or "buy in" on the part of administrators, teachers, and parents. When administrative commitment to inclusion is lacking, funds often are not provided to hire adequate qualified staff, train current employees, provide cooperative planning time for teachers, or to promote meaningful involvement of parents.

If teachers lack commitment to the approach, they will not work together effectively in the classroom and students will be aware of the discord. Teachers who do not view their positions as equal will be unwilling to share authority or instructional responsibility. Classroom "ownership" conflicts may arise, which may be compounded by the increase in teacher workload. Friction between teachers can occur when the regular education teacher views the special education teacher as subordinate in the classroom. The situation can escalate when special education teachers are overly protective of their students or unwilling to share their instructional responsibilities with the regular education teacher.

The lack of training noted by several group participants can increase opposition to inclusion. Special education teachers who are unprepared or marginally prepared for teaching cooperatively or for providing individual instruction for special education students view inclusion as a threat. Similarly, special educators are often threatened by teaching in a large group environment. If instructional roles remain ill-defined, special educators may find themselves functioning as teaching assistants rather than full partners in the classroom. Another negative scenario occurs when regular educators fail to take shared responsibility for special education students or when teaching assistants (aides) assume the role of primary teacher for that group.

Obviously, planning time is a major issue for teachers who are required to work together in classroom. A lack of planning time was mentioned frequently during the focus group interviews. Teachers need time when both the special education and regular education teacher can collaborate to plan instructional modifications to meet the needs of all students.

Parental opposition to inclusion appears to be based on the fear that children will not receive the individual attention and instruction they need to progress. Parents of regular education students, specifically parents of gifted students, may fear that the pace and depth of instruction will be modified to meet the needs of slower students. Similarly, parents of special education students sometimes fear that a rapid pace or increased depth of instruction may leave their children behind.

Based on teacher reports, students present the fewest problems related to implementing inclusion in the classroom. According to focus group members, both regular education and special education students, for the most part, are accepting of inclusion. The attitudes of students often reflect the attitudes of their teachers.

Successful strategies and practices. The most successful instructional approaches in the inclusive classroom are approaches that have a high potential for success in any classroom. Individualized instruction, tutoring (peer and adult), and small group instruction are useful for gifted students, as well as for students with special needs. It is important, however, that teachers who work in inclusive settings maintain open communication and are provided with common planning time to discuss the individual needs of students, collect information, and develop instructional modifications. Ideally, teachers will share instructional responsibilities as partners working with all students in the classroom.

Impact of inclusion in the classroom. The impact of having special education students in regular education classes is unique to each class and student. In classrooms where teachers are committed to the process and work together, special education students appear to be accepted by their peers and, barring severe behavior problems, are minimally disruptive. In fact, focus group members described classes where regular education students became friends with special education students and voluntarily assisted them on a regular basis.

Problems tend to occur when students with severe behavior disorders continually disturbed the instructional process. In such cases, the students may have to be withdrawn and instructed in a different model. Other difficulties may occur when the classmates of a special education student become overly protective and helpful toward their special education classmates or, on the other extreme, when regular students who regularly assist in class feel overburdened with the responsibility of caring for their special education classmates.

Preservice and inservice training. According to focus group members, preparing teachers for inclusion should begin in preservice training. Undergraduates planning to enter education should be provided with a variety of field experiences and a practicum beginning early in their programs of study. Participants recommend that students preparing to teach regular education should be required to enroll in special education courses. One individual proposed the merging of special education preservice training with regular education preservice training.

Many special education interview participants recognized the benefits of training in regular education for preservice special education majors. One special education teacher who made an easy transition to an inclusive classroom advocated a broad liberal arts undergraduate preparation. Most participants strongly believed that preparation for working in an inclusive environment should begin at the undergraduate level. To support increased training, they recommended that university programs be updated and university professors gain experience in current school and classroom settings.

For currently employed teachers, it's important that inservice training and materials be made available. Inservice training in inclusion, participants stated, should involve hands-on practical experience and only be minimally concerned with theory. Both regular education and special education teachers need to visit successful inclusion programs and be provided opportunities to discuss their experiences with their colleagues.

And finally, phasing in the implementation of inclusion appeared related to teacher perceptions of the approach. In districts where inclusion was initiated at the kindergarten level, teachers were concerned about the fate of their students when they progressed into grades where inclusion does not exist. Likewise, teachers at the high school level believe their job would have been easier had students benefitted from inclusion in the earlier grades.

Recommendations

Participants stated that the most important factors in the successful implementation of an inclusion model are a strong commitment of school personnel and parents, training, adequate staff to implement programs, time for planning, role clarification for regular education and special education teachers, and parent support. The following recommendations are offered to address these factors:

Demonstrate commitment for inclusion at the highest levels of the school district. It is crucial to secure commitment for inclusion from administrators, teachers, and parents prior to beginning implementation of services. If the superintendent and central office staff communicate the expectation that serving students in an inclusive setting is important to the school district, it will nurture commitment on the part of school administrators, teachers, and parents.

Develop a comprehensive implementation plan prior to beginning programs. Extensive planning is critical to the successful implementation of inclusion. A plan serves two purposes: first, it provides a public "road map" for implementing inclusion and, second, it communicates to school personnel and parents high administrative support

for the model. A plan should include the logical sequence of implementation through the grades for each school site, which should reduce gaps in service and avoid problems.

Include substantial pre-implementation training and ongoing inservice for teachers, administrators, support personnel, parents, and the community. Often teachers, administrators and parents are unsure of what inclusion is, how it will impact the classroom, and what will be required of them. Educating these groups will help ensure that everyone has a basic understanding of the inclusion approaches and related benefits.

Include site visits to existing successful inclusion programs, as well as other hands-on experiences and guest lecturers, as training opportunities for teachers. Continued opportunities for learning should be made available to teachers on a regular basis both to update their skills and to reinforce effective practices. Potential inservice topics include: peer tutoring, small group instruction, instructional modifications, behavior management, scheduling, and parent conferences.

Provide teachers with adequate time to plan collaboratively. The importance of collaborative planning cannot be over stressed. For successful integration to take place, teachers must have time to plan for the diverse needs of each included student. It is suggested that collaborating teachers be provided with daily planning time. If possible, team planning with grade-level teachers is desirable. Such provisions may require additional funding for staff and some creative scheduling.

Make the training needs of teachers working in inclusion models known to local colleges and universities. As school district administrators identify school needs for professional development, these should be discussed with the higher education community who can help make the necessary program modifications to teacher-training programs.

Allocate appropriate financial support for the inclusion model. Appropriate funding may be the most effective means to demonstrate administrative commitment to the process. Training, materials, planning time, and additional staff are costly. While some educators initially perceived inclusion programs as a means to reduce the spiraling costs of special education, from the perspective of the focus group members, this is an unwarranted assumption. On the contrary, effective inclusion may result in higher costs per student due to the needs identified in this report.

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APPENDIX

INCLUSION FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Appendix A

INCLUSION FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction

Good morning/afternoon! My name is _____ and assisting me is _____. Our task today is to talk with you about your experiences with inclusion. The purpose of our discussion is twofold: 1) to identify teacher concerns regarding inclusion; and 2) to compile strategies teachers have found effective for helping special needs children in regular classes. We would like for you to speak honestly and candidly with respect to the questions I will pose to you.

Before we begin, I need to establish a few ground rules. First, our discussion will be tape recorded because I will not be taking notes during our discussion and may later want to recall something said. Because of the recording, please speak clearly and I'll try to encourage only one speaker at a time. Also, _____ will be taking notes as we talk so that in the event the tape recorder malfunctions, she/he can help me remember what was said. Everything that you tell us will remain anonymous and will only be used in summary form. Specific names of schools and other students, teachers, or parents will not be used. If you need clarification of the question, please feel free to ask.

While time is short today, it is important that everyone has an opportunity to express their concerns and share their experiences. It will be my job to insure that everyone who has something to say has that opportunity. There are not right or wrong answers. No one in the group, including me, is to be considered the expert on anything that we talk about. Therefore, please do not judge one another's opinions; everyone's opinion is equally important.

Finally, we will take a brief formal break about midway through the morning/afternoon, but please feel free to use the restroom or take a brief stretch if you need to do so as quietly as you can.

With those guidelines in mind, let's begin!

1. First, please introduce yourself and briefly describe your experience with inclusion.

2. Please describe your concerns about inclusion.

3. As you began your experience with inclusion, what obstacles or barriers did you confront and what solutions did you create to address them? (Probe for: in the school, at the district level, with families, with colleagues, with students, or others)

4. What support has been most helpful in implementing inclusion?

5. Within the regular education classroom, which strategies or practices have seemed most effective with special needs students?

6. What effect does having a special needs child have on classroom climate and other students in a regular classroom?

7. What inservice training has been most helpful to you as you inc' ıde special needs students in the regular classroom?

8. If you were making recommendations for teacher preparation in inclusion for regular (general) and special education teachers, what would you most strongly recommend?

9. Think of one special needs student with whom you work who has made great gains. Briefly characterize for us, if you would, his/her greatest problems in the classroom and the ways you and the student have overcome them.

10. Think of one special needs student with whom you work who has not made great gains. Briefly characterize for us, if you would, his/her greatest problems in the classroom and the ways you and the student have tried to overcome them.

11. Are there other things that you would like to tell us or things we forgot to ask about?