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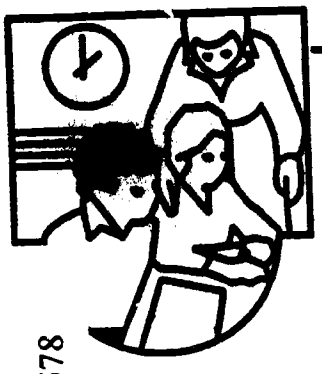
ABSTRACT

This monograph describes results of focus group interviews with 48 regular and special education teachers in West Virginia concerning their experience with inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education classrooms. An introduction notes the trend toward greater inclusion of these students while providing needed special educational support services. Among teacher concerns were academic and social discrepancies, student dependency, students with behavioral disorders, and assessment. Obstacles and barriers teachers identified concerned resistance to change; role confusion; and lack of administrative support, planning time, personnel, training, and funding. Essential factors included support of central office administrators, school principals, parents, and regular education students. Effective strategies were categorized as learning strategies, information management, instructional modifications, and assessment. Participants also felt that the regular teacher's attitude was the primary determinant of how a class is affected by inclusion. Teachers identified valuable inservice training topics such as webbing the curriculum and collaborative learning. Suggestions for improving teacher preparation programs included extensive field experiences and discussion of such topics as teaming, parent relations, and behavior management. Five recommendations are offered, such as demonstrate commitment to inclusion and increased training, and provide more time for collaborative planning. The interview protocol is appended. (DB)



Concerns About and Effective Strategies for Inclusion: Focus Group Interview Findings from West Virginia 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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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

West Virginia regular and special education teachers have included children with disabilities in regular classes for several years as a result of district and state efforts to comply with requirements of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, the Individuals with Education Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Their efforts were redoubled beginning in 1994 when the West Virginia legislature passed Senate Bill 1000 that directed faculty senates, governance groups in each school consisting of all certificated personnel, to develop strategic plans to guide the appropriate integration of exceptional needs students into regular classrooms. Faculty members are required to involve others including parents and community members in the planning process. To assist school faculties and their partners, the West Virginia Department of Education has provided a strategic planning guide to all schools, implementation team training to pilot project schools, and assistance to many. The West Virginia Education Association, the state's largest professional organization for teachers, has also published information and advised faculty senates and individual teachers about inclusion, strategic planning, and student and teacher rights under federal and West Virginia legislation. It was to WVDE and WVEA staff informed about inclusion and to West Virginia's district directors of special education that AEL's researchers turned for nomination of focus group interview participants. The following educators were most helpful in identifying 77 regular and special education teachers experienced with inclusion for participation:

Fred Aldridge, Jackson County Schools

Sandra Barkey, Kanawha County Schools

Clinton Henry, McDowell County Schools

Denton King, Lewis County Schools

Estelle Lombardi, Monongalia County Schools

Tina Meadows, Mason County Schools

Bob Miller, Mineral County Schools

Suzie Miller, Mason County Schools

Paula O'Brien, Hampshire County Schools

Sandy Sargent, Cabell County Schools

Doug Smith, Lincoln County Schools

Kathleen Smith, West Virginia Education Association

Joe Super, Randolph County Schools

Michael Valentine, West Virginia Department of Education

Doug Walters, Kanawha County Schools

Carol Williams, West Virginia Department of Education

In response to AEL's invitation to share concerns about and effective strategies for inclusion from their experience, 48 educators participated in the April 5 field test interview or in morning or afternoon interviews held on April 12 in Charleston and on April 29 in Morgantown. The contributions of the following interview participants comprise the findings of this document and are gratefully acknowledged:

Gary Ack, Mineral County Schools

Janet Alley, Mercer County Schools

John Alvieto, Randolph County Schools

Marjorie Bauer, Cabell County Schools

Nancy Bennet, Kanawha County Schools

Sue Brandon, Hampshire County Schools

Kathleen Brede, Monongalia County Schools

Deb Brown, Kanawha County Schools

Sue Childers, Wood County Schools

Bill Christian, Lincoln County Schools

Cheryl Dingass, Lincoln County Schools

Mary Dittebrand, Kanawha County Schools

Molly Edelen, Mineral County Schools

Audrey English, McDowell County Schools

Beverly Garreston, Lincoln County Schools

Susan Giordano, Kanawha County Schools

Betsy Green, Mineral County Schools

Elizabeth Green, Kanawha County Schools

Pam Hotsinpiller, Harrison County Schools

Greg Hott, Randolph County Schools

Cathy Hudnall, Kanawha County Schools

Judy Hurst, Marion County Schools

John Huxley, Kanawha County Schools

Jim Joyce, RESA VI, Ohio County

Carol Kiger, Ohio County Schools

Joann King, Monongalia County Schools

Shelly Kraus, Lewis County Schools

Nancy Lafever, Kanawha County Schools

Harriett Leurant, Kanawha County Schools

Deedra Lundeen, Monongalia County Schools

Pat Martin, Mineral County Schools

Susan Matherly, Kanawha County Schools

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Sherry Murray, Kanawha County Schools

Steve Murray, Kanawha County Schools

Tina Norman, Lewis County Schools

Diane Nuzzo, Jackson County Schools

Betsy Peterson, Kanawha County Schools

Kris Peterson, Mineral County Schools

Al Scalia, Randolph County Schools

Jennie Shaffer, Mineral County Schools

Julie Sheehan, Randolph County Schools

Craig Shelton, Kanawha County Schools

Ben Talbott, Lewis County Schools

Cindy Taylor, Monongalia County Schools

Debbie Thornton, Jackson County 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 West Virginia 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 traditional AEL partners with 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 West Virginia, staff of the Office of Special Education Programs and Assurances of the Department of Education and the West Virginia Education Association (largest teacher association in the state) recommended participants. Also, the 55 local school district directors of special education were invited to nominate up to three special and/or regular educators with inclusion experience. A total of 77 regular and special education teachers who had one or more years of experience with inclusion were nominated. AEL staff sent invitations to all for focus group interview participation at interviews held April 5 in Charleston (field test), April 12 in Charleston (two interviews), and April 28 in Morgantown (two interviews). Forty-eight educators, including 34 special educators and 14 regular educators, participated in the West Virginia interviews. 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. Gregg Leopold of AEL's Planning, Research, and Evaluation staff and Jane Hange alternately conducted the focus group 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 their session. 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 West Virginia 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

Although not labeled as obstacles to the implementation of inclusion, focus group members expressed several concerns about the approach as it was being implemented in their schools. Their major concerns include:

- discrepancy that emerges between the academic and social development of special education students and regular education students as they progress through the grade levels
- danger of special education students becoming overly dependent on teachers and peers
- changing role of special educator from teacher to consultant
- increasing needs of less academically-talented students who do not qualify for special education service
- appropriate use of instructional aides
- difficulty of including students with behavior disorders
- assessment issues

Academic and social discrepancy. A major concern expressed by special educators was how to address the social and academic gap that develops between special education students and regular education students in the higher grade levels. Participants reported that the developmental and academic discrepancy between the groups of students appears slight at the kindergarten and lower elementary grade levels. Often, the young students are unaware of the differences. As the students progress, however, the social and academic differences become

more noticeable and are more difficult to accommodate, in the experience of some focus group participants.

Student dependency. Student dependency is another concern related to special education students. Some participants described special education students who had become dependent on their special education teacher or aide when in the lower grades. This emotional attachment made it difficult for them to function independently in the upper grades. Such dependency may also develop as special education students learn to rely on classmates for assistance. One teacher commenting on this situation stated, "It's more of a problem as we include more different kinds of students. Some kids who may have made it without support now seem to need it."

Changing role of special educators. Special educators expressed concern at what they perceive is the change in their role from instructor to consultant. As they view it, the additional responsibilities related to assessment, evaluation, and consulting with teachers are shifting their primary focus away from service to students. Although they recognize that many regular education teachers are not knowledgeable about IEPs or ways to modify instruction for special education students, they are worried about the time that consulting with regular educators takes away from their contact with students.

"Gray area students." As special educators participate in regular education classrooms, they become increasingly concerned that "gray area students" will not receive the help they need. "Gray area students" was a term applied to students in need of academic assistance but who have not qualified for special education services. A group member commented, "I see lots of non-identified students who need assistance. They have problems which require more individualized attention than what regular education teachers can provide with 25 students." Ideally, in an inclusive setting, special education teachers would be available to assist any student in the class needing help. Practically speaking, however, many participants stated that the demands on the special education teacher may be too great to provide assistance to every student who needs it.

Aides in the classroom. One focus group member was especially concerned with the appropriate use of instructional aides in the classroom. The teacher was concerned that aides were assigned duties that did not involve actually working with students. Another participant was concerned that aides lacked the training necessary to assume instructional responsibilities for students.

Another concern regarding instructional aides was the potential for a special needs student to become too dependent on a particular aide. Just as students become dependent on teachers, a student who works with the same aide daily may come to rely on that person and may not interact with others sufficiently to become independent. It is important that a student doesn't become so attached to one aide that no one can take over if the aide is absent. Similarly, it is important that an aide maintains a professional perspective toward the student. Participants

described situations in which students were able to manipulate their aides into giving permission for activities or privileges that would be refused by the teacher.

Students with behavioral disorders. Participants reported that including children with behavioral disorders (BD) into the regular classroom can pose serious problems for both special and regular education teachers. Behavior-disordered students may tend to display socially unacceptable behavior, sometimes aggressively, which concerns teachers, students and parents. One teacher stated, "I believe there are some students who shouldn't be included. We are shutting down some facilities (self-contained classes) that I believe are needed at times." Another teacher declared, "BD kids, if not addressed, will be the downfall of inclusion."

Assessment. A final concern of focus group members is student assessment. One teacher was "concerned about my students testing out of the program with the Woodcock Test. They score so high that they get one year of a transition IEP and then they're out, but they still need services."

A second testing issue related to the current focus on standardized testing as a means of accountability. Participants reported that the pressure on regular education teachers to have their students perform well on standardized tests made some less willing to accept students into the class who may have the potential to lower the class average.

Obstacles

Focus group members identified the following obstacles to the successful implementation of inclusion:

- resistance to change on the part of administrators, teachers, and parents
- role confusion
- lack of administrative support
- lack of planning time
- lack of adequate personnel
- lack of training
- lack of funding

Resistance to change. Focus group participants identified the "fear of change" as the primary obstacle to the implementation of inclusion in schools. Participants related how parents

and teachers often resist changes that they find threatening to their personal or professional security. For example, many parents of students with disabilities about to be included in a regular class fear the loss of a small group environment in which their child is the focus of intense individualized instruction. By contrast, parents of regular education students may fear that in an inclusive classroom the special education students will be the focus of attention and their children will receive less rigorous academic instruction.

Participants reported that some regular and special educators, especially those with several years of experience, may feel threatened as professionals by the implementation of inclusion. Over time, teachers develop an instructional style based on their philosophy of how children learn. An instructional model such as inclusion tends to challenge some of these beliefs. For example, in an inclusion classroom, teachers are expected to share classroom responsibilities equally—to develop a partnership as collaborating or coteachers. This expectation is often threatening to the security and self-esteem of teachers accustomed to being the sole teacher in a classroom. The resulting insecurity can be magnified when teachers do not feel qualified to make the instructional modifications necessary to serve the individual needs of special education students in their class.

Role confusion. Role identity becomes an issue when two teachers are expected to work closely together. Although the intent of inclusion is for both teachers to share responsibility, participants described a few regular education teachers who tended to view the special educator as a subordinate whose primary role is to function as an assistant working with special education students. Similarly, interview participants reported that some special educators, feeling protective of their students, may tend to focus their efforts on students with disabilities. Under these circumstances, teachers are less likely to share information about their students.

Tension between the regular education and special education teacher can result when teaching philosophies and instructional styles differ. Although focus group members did not agree about the value of having similar teaching styles in the classroom, this potential barrier to inclusion was acknowledged by many. In addition, when tension between teachers exists, the regular education students may tend to view the special education students as "different" and separate. One teacher commented, "If I don't feel welcome, my special education student probably doesn't." In response, one participant advised, "you need to put aside what you feel" for inclusion to be successful.

Lack of administrative support. Several group members pointed to a lack of building-level administrative support as an obstacle to implementing the inclusion model. When the decision to implement inclusion originates from outside the school, the principal may not be fully supportive. One group member discussed her concern stating, "We get a great deal of lip service, but when it comes down to it, the question is will you support me?" When the principal doesn't support inclusion, basic organizational processes, such as scheduling and providing material resources, become problems or low priorities.

Lack of planning time. Planning time was an issue that concerned almost every group member. If inclusion is to be successful, teachers must have time for collaborative planning. At the minimum, coteachers must confer frequently each week about their students and appropriate instructional modifications. Ideally, grade-level teams of teachers should have time to plan and develop instructional modifications across classes at each grade level.

Rarely, according to participants, is adequate planning time available. One teacher stated, "There is little time for us to discuss student limitations." Teachers do confer before or after school, but more often planning takes place on a hit or miss basis. The lack of planning time tends to aggravate the insecurity that exists about including special education students in the regular classrooms.

Lack of personnel. In the view of interview participants, teachers would be more supportive of inclusion if adequate personnel were made available to assist students and teachers. A shortage of teachers, instructional assistants or aides, and substitute teachers is a serious obstacle to implementing inclusion.

As a rule, special education teachers are responsible for duties in addition to classroom instruction. For example, special educators are required to attend Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings, assess students, and assist with curriculum revision while continuing to provide individualized instruction in several different classrooms. With the increasing numbers of students being identified as having special needs, special educators described their difficulties in adequately assisting the regular education teacher and providing the attention needed to each special education student. The fragmentation of performance that can result from multiple duties contributes to the negative feelings held by regular education teachers toward working in an inclusive setting.

Lack of training. Focus group members were unanimous in their support of the need for training to prepare teachers, administrators, and parents for inclusion. They reported that in many West Virginia schools, teachers do not have a basic understanding of the nature and principles of inclusion. One of the main problems, according to several participants, is that "teachers don't know what inclusion is." Some teachers defined inclusion in their settings as a partnership between a regular educator and special educator for the purpose of providing instruction to all students in the class. Beyond the need for a basic understanding of inclusion, participants believed that teachers need training in appropriate curriculum and instruction, alternative means of assessment, and the characteristics of students with disabilities.

Lack of funding. A lack of funding for training, personnel, and instructional materials was identified as a major barrier. According to one teacher, special education facilities in her district were built because it was less expensive to house all special education students in one place. Now, at a time when funds are being cut, school officials are attempting to implement what is the much more costly approach of inclusion.

Supports for Successful Implementation

Four main sources of support were identified by members of the West Virginia focus groups. They include support from the central office administrators (county), school principals, parents of special education students, and regular education students.

Central office administrators. Several participants reported that their central office administrators demonstrated support for inclusion through the allocation of funds, most notably for training and materials. One teacher commented on the importance of county (district) support she received, including "even a pat on the back once in awhile."

School principals. The most frequently mentioned source of support for inclusion were the school administrators. One participant noted that the principal "sets the tone. When he/she demonstrates respect for the special educator, regular educators will then be supportive." Supportive principals provided opportunities for teaming, time for collaboration, and inservice training. At one school, the principal allowed teachers to interview applicants to replace a departing team member. At another school, the principal secured funding for programs through grants.

Parents of special education students. Several participants worked closely with parents of special education students. Many of these parents supported the practice of inclusion through communication with teachers, participation in training, and volunteer work with the general education population. Once they were won over, these parents become the strongest advocates for the inclusion approach.

Regular education students. Participants often named regular education students as the most receptive of stakeholders involved in the implementation of inclusion. This was especially true at the elementary level where special education students appear less "different" to their peers than in the higher grades. A group participant suggested, "If we start including special education students at the elementary level, regular education students will be much more willing to accept them later on." Regular education students often participated in peer tutoring. In at least one school, students learned sign language in order to communicate better with a disabled peer.

Other important sources of support mentioned by focus group members were service personnel, custodians, and cooks. Many were described as very willing to install handles, lower water fountains, modify rest rooms, and/or prepare special meals for students with special needs.

Successful Strategies

Participants advocated the individualization of instruction as the key to successfully teaching students with special needs. Additionally, several teachers offered specific suggestions

that they had found to be successful in the inclusive classroom. The suggestions are categorized as:

- learning strategies
- information management
- instructional modifications
- assessment

Learning strategies. Although no one method of teaching fits all students, many teachers recommended peer tutoring, cooperative learning, and peer modeling as effective for regular education and special education students in the inclusive classroom. The most common approach named was peer tutoring in which capable students in one academic area assist those who are not. Some teachers reported the value of having special education students serve as peer tutors for regular education students where appropriate.

Cooperative learning is a popular strategy in regular education classrooms and can be equally successful in an inclusive class, according to interview participants. Cooperative learning provides children with academic support and opportunities for social interaction.

Peer modeling is used less for academics and more for teaching appropriate behavior. One teacher related how having a student with a behavior disorder act as model for a regular education classmate improved the behavior of both.

Information management. The information management techniques described by focus group members have the potential to increase communication among teachers as well as improve instruction and facilitate record keeping. Teachers described using checklists to monitor the behavior of students with behavior disorders and communicating the results among all teachers of the student. In one school, teachers use a note system where they communicated about their students by taking and passing notes on a regular basis to make daily adjustments in classwork for students. Teachers described the benefits of these systems as increased communication among teachers and improved consistency across teachers when dealing with students.

Instructional modifications. Teachers advocated the use of advance organizers and previewing material with special education students before all students began the tasks in class. Oral reading, oral discussion of readings, and the teaching of sequencing were also proposed as effective instructional techniques. Modification of classwork or homework so that special education students work on modifications of the same assignment as their peers was described as a means of improving the success rate of special education students.

Assessment. Several focus group members modified assessment procedures for student work. Generally, teachers recommended reducing the number of responses on test items, reading test items aloud, providing students with the opportunity to respond orally to test items, and adjusting the time provided for special education students to complete tests.

Effects of Special Education Students on Class Climate

Focus group participants agreed that the impact of having special education students in a regular education classroom was unique to each class and student, and depended, in part, on the type and severity of the student's disability. Group members did, however, offer some generalizations and commented on the effects inclusion has had on them as professionals.

The attitude of the regular education teacher was described as the primary determinant of how a class is affected by the presence of special education students. If the teacher is positive and readily accepts the student and the special education teacher, inclusion can provide positive learning experiences for teachers and students alike. In the experience of the West Virginia teachers, positive effects of inclusion are most often observed at the elementary level. However, secondary school regular and special educators also cited encouraging examples of effects.

It may be reasonable to state that the greatest impact of a special education student in a classroom is the modification of instruction that occurs. One focus participant related how initially the regular education teacher slowed the pace causing the regular education students to become bored. As the special educator made instructional modifications, the regular education teacher could once again pick up the pace and the problem was resolved. However, in many cases, the need to find alternative teaching strategies and modify activities has benefitted the entire class. For example, a teacher commented on how she tried different games that she might not have tried which "helped the whole atmosphere of the class."

One of the most positive comments was from a regular teacher who stated "Inclusion has humanized all of us." Participants reported that students and teachers became more understanding of individual differences and began to view special education students more positively.

However, not all inclusive experiences have been positive. Students with severe behavioral disorders may be quite disruptive and sometimes dangerous to other class members. Emotional outbursts and other forms of acting out can be detrimental when young students can't comprehend the situation. Also, some special education students may refuse to become involved in class activities. Such students, participants believed, might benefit from alternative settings on an as needed basis or for his/her primary placement.

Teachers who spoke of their experiences with inclusion were very positive about its impact on their professional lives. They reported becoming more understanding of the views of their colleagues and others. Both regular and special education teachers praised the increased knowledge they acquired from adopting new teaching strategies and from learning about student differences. Several teachers expressed satisfaction at seeing special education students learn and grow. One teacher stated, "If you provide the opportunities, you will get more than you ever imagined." And finally, a teacher added, "It keeps me going to see students with such problems continue to achieve."

Helpful Inservice Training

Although many teachers reported a lack of adequate inservice training, they were specific about the topics they consider most valuable. Recommended topics include: webbing the curriculum, collaborative learning, adjusting the curriculum to meet learner needs, crisis prevention, teaming, stress management, cooperative learning, parent/educator advocacy training, inclusion, and whole language. Workshops which provide hands-on or learn-by-doing experiences were preferred. Programs coordinated by the West Virginia Department of Education (such as the implementation team training), local districts, and by Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) VIII were praised, as was the work of a Marshall University professor on webbing the curriculum and a North Carolina professor on teaming.

Recommendations for Teacher Preparation

Suggestions for improving teacher preparation programs included extensive field experiences and specific topics to include in teacher education programs.

Focus group members favored requiring participation in field experiences early in students' college careers. Field experiences in a variety of regular education and special education classrooms were suggested. Participants stated that students preparing to enter regular education, as well as those preparing for a career in special education, should be familiar with all types of classroom settings.

One participant suggested "shadowing" experiences as a part of training. "Its important," he stated, "that all preservice students have extensive knowledge of both regular education and special education classrooms." Such hands-on experiences could be followed by theory. Another suggested component of the undergraduate experience was an internship in a special education class. The internship would be in addition to the student teaching experience found in most teacher education training programs.

Topics suggested for all preservice teachers included: teaming, parent relations, IEPs, and behavior management. Participants recommended that preservice teachers also learn the characteristics of special education students, ways to provide for individual differences, and the nature and nurture of student self-esteem.

One teacher made the following suggestion: "I think teaching is so important that four years isn't enough to prepare you. I think you need to spend as much time being a full participant in the field as you do sitting in a college class." Adopting this proposal would have the added benefit of providing additional support in classrooms for veteran teachers.

CONCLUSIONS

Obstacles/Concerns

Focus group participants' experience with inclusion had been primarily positive experiences, and most were advocates for the approach. However, they did identify several obstacles to implementing inclusion. The obstacles included:

- resistance to change on the part of teachers, administrators and parents
- role conflict for regular education and special education teachers and aides
- lack of support from central office and school administrators
- lack of planning time
- lack of qualified staff
- lack of appropriate training
- lack of funding

Some teachers were also concerned about the potential for special education students to become overly dependent on adults or on their peers in an inclusive environment. Some teachers were troubled by a perceived change in their roles from teacher to consultant and believed this would limit their direct services to students. Their concern continues as they see a growing number of students needing their instructional support. And finally, group members expressed concern over the proper use of instructional aides.

Supports

Focus group members credited central office personnel, school principals, parents, and regular education students in helping inclusion succeed. While the lack of support from these groups was viewed as an obstacle to successful implementation, the presence of support from these groups almost certainly made inclusion a positive experience.

Effects of Special Education Students on Class Climate

The impact of including special education students in regular education classes is highly individual to the students included and the class. In many cases the presence of special education students seemed to bring out the best in the teacher and regular education students. Two of the most significant benefits of inclusion were teachers adopting a variety of instructional techniques and students learning to appreciate individual differences.

Problems did occur, however, when inadequate support was provided for special education students or when the students' behavior was so disruptive to the learning environment that they had to be removed. Many success stories involved special education students developing communication skills with the support of their regular education classmates. Less successful students were most often those with behavior disorders or so severely disabled that they were not able to benefit from a regular classroom.

Inservice/Preservice Training

Hands-on learning experiences were important to successful inservice sessions according to group participants. West Virginia focus group participants were interested in practical "how-to sessions" on topics relating to specific student disabilities, collaborative learning, teaming, and modifying instruction.

Suggestions for preservice training focused on two components: field experiences and specialized topics to be included in the curriculum. Teachers favored including early and frequent field experiences with internships in regular and special education classrooms for all education majors.

Successful Strategies

The most frequently recommended strategies for working with special education students in an inclusive classroom were individualized instruction (e.g., oral reading) and peer tutoring. Cooperative learning, frequent communication between coteachers, and modification of student assessments were also seen as important to supporting special education students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Demonstrate commitment to inclusion. Administrators at every level from the superintendent to the school principal must make known their support for inclusion. Public advocacy on the part of school leaders will help build commitment for inclusion among teachers, support staff, and parents.

Train, train, train. Inservice training for administrators, teachers, aides, and parents is critical for smooth implementation of inclusion. Training should be experiential, providing practical ideas for the classroom, as well as opportunities to visit successful inclusion programs. Both regular and special educators, as well as instructional assistants, can benefit from training in the concepts of inclusion, teaming, curriculum modification, classroom management, and a variety of instructional techniques. If necessary, provide inservice workshops with released time during the school day or during non-contract hours with participants receiving compensation for their time.

A significant benefit to training is the opportunities it provides for teachers and staff to interact with one another. Working together during workshop session reduces the anxiety associated with role confusion and other changes facing teachers who are planning an inclusive program.

Allocate adequate funds to support inclusion. Inclusion is not a way to save money. In many districts more teachers and/or teaching assistants are needed to serve students in an inclusive setting than are required in a resource or self-contained model. In an inclusive school, special education teachers may serve several special education students at one time but often must travel to work with students and regular education teachers throughout the school or in separate schools.

Provide time for collaborative planning. Ideally, all persons working with special education students would have the opportunity to meet regularly to discuss the students they have in common. At a minimum, collaborative planning time should be available to collaborating regular education and special education teachers.

Providing adequate planning time will certainly involve creative scheduling and may require additional staff or the hiring of substitutes. Teachers that are required to share the responsibilities of instruction and provide individual accommodations for a variety of students must have time to work together for instructional planning.

Plan extensively for implementation. Create a formal description of the inclusion program from which a detailed implementation plan can be developed. Both the description and plan for implementation should be completed well in advance of beginning the program.

Administrators, regular educators, and special educators, as well as appropriate support staff and parents, should participate in the planning process. Plans should be made public as a means of communicating the intent of the district and to provide school staff a blueprint for implementation. The plan should be broad enough to provide a vision for the staff and specific enough to provide a detailed description of the program.

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APPENDIX

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 o ers)

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 include 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?

Appalachia Educational Laboratory
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Concerns About and Effective Strategies for Inclusion: Focus Group Interview Findings from West Virginia Teachers

A. Background

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