

Running Head: IMPACT OF INCLUSION

The Impact of Inclusion on 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Students with Disabilities

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May 2016

A thesis submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of The College at Brockport, State University of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

### Abstract

This qualitative study explores students' and families' perspectives and attitudes of inclusion on 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students with disabilities. Data were collected to determine the type of impact inclusion has on students with disabilities and their literacy development. Social, academic, and emotional factors were also considered throughout this study.

*Keywords: inclusion, perceptions, satisfaction, special education*

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### **Introduction**

“Dear Mrs. Smith, We hope you had a great weekend. We were wondering if it would be possible to meet with you and discuss ways we can all work together to support Evan in the classroom. Last week, he had a few days of saying, ‘I’m not having a good day!’ We would like him to be able to go home with positive feelings about school! Would there be any days before or after school hours that it would be possible to meet this week?” This was an email sent to a parent within the first months of school. Before this email, there were several others sent in regards to her child’s behavior. It was this email that had me thinking if this placement was going to be a success or not for this student. The response from the parent to this email was a very concerned one stating, “Thank you for informing me, this is so out of his character. When is a good time to meet in person?”

Evan is second grader with an Individualized Learning Plan – IEP. According to the U.S Department of Education (2007) an IEP is a written document designed by education professionals who work together to improve educational results of students with disabilities. The IEP document is designed to closely meet the unique needs of students with disabilities (2007). This was Evan’s first year being in a classroom with more than eight other peers to work alongside with and to keep up with for the school year. Last year, he was placed in a 12:1:1 special education classroom. A 12:1:1 classroom is a more restrictive classroom environment and only consists of 12 students with disabilities, 1 teacher, and 1 classroom aid. This year, the decision was made to place Evan in an integrated co-taught classroom with me as his general education teacher along with a special education teacher and 15 other students. In the article, *Developing Teachers’ Competences for Designing Inclusive Learning Experiences* written by

Silvia Baldiris Navarro, Panagiotis Zervas, Ramon Fabregat Gesa and Demetrios G. Sampson (2016), inclusion is defined as being the aim to ensure that learners with diverse needs and learning disabilities have equal opportunities in accessing learning resources, services and experiences in general; therefore, inclusion is the coming together of both students with and without disabilities in one classroom setting.

### **Purpose**

The classroom I teach in is designed to meet the unique needs of students with IEPs along with general education students. This type of classroom setting is called inclusion and inclusion provides students with disabilities the opportunity to work alongside their peers in a general education classroom. I have three students total with IEPs in my classroom along with 13 other students without IEPs. All three students with disabilities came from a 12:1:1 classroom setting last year. This year, the decision was made to place these students in my second grade classroom along with general education students.

As I observe and work with these students on a day to day basis, I continue to think of ways in which these students can be most successful in my classroom; however, being their teacher, I cannot help but wonder about how these students' literacy behaviors have been impacted since being placed in a general education classroom setting. The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions and explore the attitudes of three students with disabilities and their parents in regard to inclusion.

### **Rationale**

According to our U.S Department of Education (2007), our education department in the United States believes that in order to obtain educational excellence, our schools needs to ensure equal opportunity for all learners, and that is what is intended for all my learners in my second

grade inclusive classroom. Inclusion supports this common mission of ensuring *all* student achievement. Seray Olcay Gül and Sezgin Vuran are both writers of the article, *Children with Special Needs' Opinions and Problems about Inclusive Practices* (2015) and they state that inclusion offers students with special needs the opportunity to learn in a mainstream classroom and work alongside their peers. The end goal being that all students are given equal academic and social opportunities.

Gul and Vuran (2015) continue on to say that students with special needs should be provided with necessary training environments and services that will lead to their success. Inclusion is based on educating individuals with special needs in mainstream classes and is the most widely accepted and commonly used method in the respect of meeting education needs of individuals with special needs (Gul and Vuran 2015).

Many schools around the country open their core values and belief statement for the public to see on their school webpage. They each have their own unique beliefs and goals; however, they all signify one important similarity between them all, and that is to strive for educational excellence.

The success of Evan and all of my special education students is and will be dependent upon key players – teachers, parents, and students. What I hoped to accomplish by the end of this study was to determine the perceptions and explore the attitudes of students with disabilities and their parents in regards to inclusion. This study is important to me because I want to determine the impact inclusion has had on their perceptions and attitudes towards school this year.

### **Research Questions**

The specific research questions that guided this study were the following:

1. What is the impact of inclusion on 2nd grade students with disabilities?

2. What are students' and families' perceptions of inclusion?
3. What are students' and families' attitudes towards inclusion?

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

There are several factors that go into the decision making process of where a student with an Individualized Learning Plan (IEP) is going to be placed. The educational settings range from least restrictive to most restrictive classrooms. There has been an ongoing dilemma of where to place students with special needs year to year. Inclusion is a well-known teaching practice that allows for students with disabilities to be a part of a general education classroom setting. According to Gül and Vuran (2015), there are various classroom settings that meet the needs of students with disabilities. Inclusion is the most widely accepted and commonly used classroom setting (Gül and Vuran 2015).

### **Co-teaching vs. Special Education**

The decision was made last year to move my three students with IEPs from a 12:1:1 special education classroom into an inclusive classroom setting. In a 12:1:1 special education classroom, only students with IEPs are placed in the class. One teacher and one aid must be present in the room at all times; however, in an inclusive setting students with and without disabilities learn together in one classroom throughout the entire school day. According to Maggin, Wehby, Partin, Robertson and Oliver (2011), self-contained classrooms are meant to provide more opportunities for academic and social development; however, inclusion also promises students with disabilities this same opportunity.

In a qualitative study, Tremblay (2013) compared two instructional models, integrated co-teaching (co-teaching is when there are two teachers in the classroom at all times, one general education teacher and one special education teacher) and special education for students with disabilities.

The study compared two instructional approaches. The first one was a full-time co-teaching setting involving a general education teacher and a special education teacher. This approach was centered on the inclusion of a group of students with learning disabilities within a larger group of students without disabilities. The second instructional approach was a special education setting. This approach centered on the students being instructed in a much smaller group with students at the same academic level (Tremblay, 2013).

In order to assess the effectiveness of the two instruction models, the study (Tremblay, 2013) examined student achievement. Students were tested in reading and writing. The results of this study showed that students in the inclusive setting progressed more significantly in reading and writing in first grade and second grade. What this signifies is that inclusion may in fact have a positive academic impact on students with and without disabilities when being placed together in one classroom setting.

In a study done by Glazzard, J. (2013), it was found that inclusion could also have a negative impact on students with disabilities. This study addressed ways in which inappropriate placements for students in a school have resulted in negative effects on students. School performance data was also impacted in a negative way due to inclusion causing the school's overall effectiveness be negatively impacted. Glazzard (2013) states that, "Although literature has emphasized the relationship between inclusion and pedagogical transformation, there are limits to the extent to which mainstream schools can transform their pedagogical approaches

under the umbrella of performativity” (p.95). This signifies that Glazzard (2013) found that despite the research proving inclusion to have its strengths, he found that inclusion negatively impacts school performance data, which is so highly accounted for in education today.

Ryndak, Hughes, Alper & McDonnell (2012) conducted research to determine the long-term outcomes of education context for students with disabilities. This study used existing research to determine the impact inclusion has had on students with disabilities post-school. Ryndak, Hughes, Alper & McDonnell (2012) investigated the lives of adults with disabilities who experienced inclusive education over an extended period of time. It focused on the impact of long-term outcomes for students who were either in an inclusive general education setting or a more restrictive educational setting. The study found that inclusive education has a positive impact on post-school outcomes. The participant in the study was identified as the “lowest functioning” student in the general education classroom during the time the participant was in school. Three years after the student finished school, the participant had been employed as a judicial system government employee living in an apartment. This study showed that inclusion indeed can have a positive impact on students with disabilities.

In a study conducted by Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, & Cosier (2011), it was found that after observing a self-contained classroom, everything observed and considered education, “...could have been transported to inclusive settings without compromising the education these students were receiving” (p. 73). Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, & Cosier (2011) believe that after conducting their research, students with disabilities should be moved back into general education classrooms with the support needed and out of more-restricted classroom settings. Inclusion offers many positives for students with disabilities when compared

to a more restrictive classroom model and should in fact be considered when placing a student with a disability into a classroom.

### **Instructional Practices**

All students should receive appropriate education regardless of their classroom setting. Kauffman and Badar (2014) discussed how important effective instruction is for special education students. This study addressed the idea that inclusion may not always be the answer for some students with disabilities. Kauffman and Badar (2014) found that the general education setting for special education students sometimes failed to make appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities.

There are several assumptions of inclusion that are addressed throughout the article, and the author makes it a point to discuss ways in which inclusion and special education can be effected based on these assumptions. Kauffman and Badar (2014) discuss the following five assumptions and rebuttal these assumptions with data and facts taken from other reliable sources:

*Assumption #1* - Special education should develop educational procedures that can be implemented in general education, such that special education essentially works itself out of business, preparing general education to take over what special education does.

*Assumption #2* - All education should be special education; good teaching is good teaching, and special education is merely good teaching, which is not really special.

*Assumption #3* - Discrimination has the same remedy, regardless of the student's characteristics: Inclusion is the remedy for discrimination, regardless of the nature of the diversity in question.

*Assumption #4* - Special education should not be what students get when general education fails them; general education simply needs reform.

*Assumption #5* - Tiered education (e.g., Response to Intervention,) solves the problem of special education.

In a study conducted by Rakap & Parlak-Rakap (2011), embedded instruction for children with special needs was evaluated along with determining the effectiveness of this practice. Through extensive research, Rakap & Parlak-Rakap (2011) found that in order to teach a range of skills to children with various development needs in inclusive classrooms, embedded instruction is essential. It was also determined that children who learn new skills through embedded instruction will also use and maintain these skills overtime. Effective instruction is essential for all students, and particularly for those students with disabilities. Students with disabilities have various needs and regardless of what type of classroom those students are put into, effective instruction plays an essential role in their success.

### **Student Experiences**

There has been much research showing that students with and without disabilities can benefit academically and socially from effective inclusive practices; however, much of this literature does not directly include the voices of students. In this qualitative study, Shogren, Gross, Forber-Pratt, Francis, Satter, Blue-Banning and Hill (2015) discuss the importance of including students' voices while investigating the impact of inclusion at the same time.

The participants of this study (Shogren, Gross, Forber-Pratt, Francis, Satter, Blue-Banning and Hill 2015) included 11 focus groups (6 with students without disabilities and 5 with students with disabilities). Two individual interviews were conducted with students with severe disabilities across six schools. Some of the interview questions included the following (Shogren, Gross, Forber-Pratt, Francis, Satter, Blue-Banning and Hill 2015):

- “Tell us about the teachers you have. How do your teachers help you learn?”

- “Do some kids need different things to be successful? What do you think of this?”
- “What is it like to be in (general education) class?”
- “What do you think about having (names of kids with disabilities) in your class?”

The results of the study confirmed that students felt a sense of belonging to their school. Students felt supported and connected to teachers and peers. The majority of students also felt that their teacher was the key element to what made them feel supported at school. Words such as, “strict” and “nice,” were commonly used when describing their teachers. It was also found that the patience of teachers played a key role when students with disabilities were being helped with a problem that did not make sense (Satter, Blue-Banning and Hill, 2015).

One of my concerns with having students with disabilities placed in a general education classroom is the risk of potentially being bullied by their peers. Satter, Blue-Banning and Hill (2015) found that the results of their study found this concern to be true; however, both students with and without disabilities described seeing and experiencing bullying outside of the classroom for example, playground, bus, or bathroom.

In this study, Satter, Blue-Banning and Hill (2015) wanted to know the difference in opinions on inclusion between students with disabilities and students without disabilities. They found that students without disabilities found it to be a very positive experience having students with disabilities in their classroom. They viewed students with disabilities as students who were just like anyone else.

Students with disabilities also gave their opinion on inclusion. Satter, Blue-Banning and Hill (2015) found that these students enjoyed being in the classroom with their peers. The study also found that students with disabilities’ preferred being in the classroom with their peers compared to being pulled out for other services.

The social and emotional impact of inclusion on students with disabilities is another issue I focused on as I conducted my research. The authors, Krull, Wilbert & Hennemann (2014) investigated whether the type of classroom problems (classroom learning problem vs. classroom behavior problem) impacts the intensity of social exclusion within the classroom and their academic self-concept. They found that there was a high risk and early onset of social exclusion of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, and in order to decrease the risk of developing these problems in later school years, an early approach to managing behavior problems is needed (Krull, Wilbert & Hennemann, 2014). If it not often student voices are heard in regards to their educational experiences and preferences and at times, the voices of students are the most powerful voices of all.

## **Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to determine students' with disabilities and parents' perceptions and attitudes towards inclusion. Student observations, parent and student surveys and field notes were used in order to determine the attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities and parents in regards to inclusion. I categorized my data throughout the study into common themes while keeping my research question in mind.

### **Participants**

The participants of this qualitative study are 3 second grade students with IEPs – one girl and two boys. All three participants were within the ages of 7 and 8. I made a purposeful selection of my participants because I work with these three students on a day-to-day basis as I am their general education teacher for their second grade academic year. All three participants were together in first grade in a self-contained 12:1:1 classroom setting. The decision was made

to move all three students into a second grade inclusive classroom. In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, a pseudonym name for all participants are used throughout this study. The names of my participants were Evan, Lily, and Max. Evan receives Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy. Lily receives Music Therapy, and Physical Therapy. Max receives physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, and Speech Therapy. All three participants and their parents provided consent to be a part of this study.

### **Setting**

The setting of this study is a second grade inclusive classroom. There are 16 students with two teachers – one general education teacher and one special education teacher. Three students have IEPs, three students receive Academic Intervention Services (AIS), and 11 students receive general education. Professional teaching experiences ranged from 1 to 10 years. Participants represented a suburban public school setting. School demographics reported a majority of Caucasian student body.

The student interviews and surveys were conducted during the participants' literacy block in my second grade classroom. All three participants completed the survey at the same time at the back table of the classroom with me. Student interviews were completed individually with me as the interviewer. Parent interviews were conducted through phone either during or after school hours.

### **Positionality**

During the time of this study, I was a 23-year-old graduate student at The College at Brockport, State University of New York (SUNY) studying Literacy Education (B-12). I earned my Bachelors of Science in Elementary Education degree and my Bachelors of Arts in English creative writing also from The College at Brockport, State University of New York (SUNY).

I am currently working in a suburban elementary school. I work in an inclusive 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classroom with me as the general education teacher alongside a special education teacher with whom I co-teach with all day. This will be my first year of teaching second grade. The role that I took throughout this study is the participant observer. I took part in activities as the classroom general education teacher. I also took the role of an inside observer who engages in activities at the study site and I recorded information at the same time as participating in the activities.

Throughout my childhood, I grew up in a suburban area and went to a suburban school. As I think back to my years of primary, middle, and high school, I can remember having separate classrooms for students with disabilities and without disabilities. Now being a general education teacher both students with and without disabilities, I am interested in the type of impact inclusion has on students with disabilities. My three students with disabilities have motivated me and sparked a passion in me to get to know the three of them as students who have a voice to be heard. This is what established the key purpose of this study.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

In this qualitative study, I used multiple data collection methods in order to validate any findings. A triangulation of my data was used in order to determine a more accurate analysis. A separate interview for both students and each set of parents was created, an attitude survey was created for just students, and a picture prompt with students were all used as a way to collect information to determine common themes related to my research.

Students took part in a self-made survey about their perceptions of second grade. I also asked students to draw me a pictures of second grade on a blank sheet of paper. They were allowed to draw anything that reminded them of school this year. I then asked them to draw me a picture of first grade on another sheet of blank paper. Again, they were allowed to draw anything

that reminded them of school last year. After students drew their pictures, I had a conversation with each student separately in regards to the pictures they drew. I asked, “Can you tell me about your picture?” “Where are you in this picture?” “What are you doing in the picture” and “How do you feel in your picture?”

I created interviews for both students and their parents geared toward determining the perceptions they have about school and literacy learning in an inclusive classroom. The interview process for each set of parents consisted of me asking 8 questions in a phone interview while parents provided verbal answers. Answers to the interview questions were transcribed verbatim. In order to help ensure understanding, answers were reflected back and probing questions were used to seek clarification.

Interviews with the students were done during schools hours. The interview was done in person and on-demand. Answers were transcribed verbatim. Time was set aside to interview each student individually. At times, answers were reflected back and probing questions were used to seek clarification in order to ensure understanding with each of the student participants. After each interview was conducted, I highlighted points of interest and identified reoccurring replies and commonalities among responses within the students and within the parents.

### **Procedures**

The three student participants of this study were three second grade students with disabilities: Evan, Lily, and Max. Evan, Lily, and Max were given interviews with me as the interviewee during three different time periods during class. Their interview consisted of 6 questions related to inclusion and literacy lasting about 10-20 minutes each. The questions consisted of the following: *What do you like in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade? What do you like least about 2<sup>nd</sup>*

*grade? Who are your friends? How do you feel about coming to school this year? How did you feel about coming to school last year? How do you feel about reading and writing this year?*

The interviews were conducted within the classroom during a literacy period of instruction. Each student was taken to the back table individually during the interview. Several times throughout the interview, the student participants would become uncomfortable, as if they were being tested. I made sure to ensure each student that I simply wanted to ask a few question about school. I communicated to each participant that they may see me writing down their answers, but that it was okay and it was only being done to remember what they said.

Evan was my first student I interviewed. Evan's interview lasted about 10 minutes. Evan was diagnosed with having other health impairment on his Individualized Learning Plan (IEP). Throughout the four week period of data collection, informal observations were taking place to determine the way he interacts with other student within the classroom. Often times, Evan struggled to socially fit in causing him to become inappropriate at times. Evan's ability to become easily distractive during the interview may have caused Evan to not have answered the questions to the best of his ability and honesty may or may not have been flawed.

Lily was my second student I interviewed. Lily's interview lasted around 20 minutes. Lily is diagnosed with having a speech and language impairment on her Individualized Learning Plan (IEP). Lily was the only girl out of the three student participants. I found Lily to consistently gravitate toward the other two male students with disabilities throughout the school day. Shy and awkward at times, I found Lily to be the most talkative during the interview.

Max was my last student to be interviewed. Max's interview lasted around 15 minutes. Max was diagnosed with having a speech and language impairment on his Individualized Learning Plan (IEP). Out of the three participants and based on informal observations throughout

the school day, I found that Max is very well-liked by other students in the classroom and makes friends easily. During the interview, Max was reluctant to provide answers to the questions. Often times, follow up questions were needed in order for Max to fully answer the questions. With that being said, Max's negative attitude may or may not have influenced his responses causing them to be flawed.

An attitude survey was also conducted with each of the three participant students. The survey consisted of 10 questions. Participants were asked to color the face (sad face to represent negative feelings and a smiley face to represent positive feelings) that best fits how they feel about each statement. The statements included the following: I like coming to school. I have many friends at school. I like my teacher. People like me at school. School is easy. I like to do my school work. I like to read by myself. I like to read with my friends. I like to write. I have someone to play with at recess.

All three participant were given the survey at the same time at a back table in the room during a literacy period during class. Lily and Max seemed to have answered each survey questions honestly and with a positive attitude, while Evan was hesitant to answer the questions – he was more focused on what the other two participants' answers than his own and therefore, his survey may or not be flawed.

Lastly, parents of each student were given phone interviews during and after school hours. Phone interviews with parents lasted between 10-20 minutes. Both mother and father of each student were given the interview during two different times. All parents answered the questions to the best of their ability and with a positive attitude. I found that parents were vulnerable and allowed themselves to be an open book as they answers all questions honestly.

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure credibility in this research study, I completed a proposal of my research topic and process. The Institutional Review Board at SUNY Brockport approved my proposal. I ensure to follow guidelines for storage and confidentiality in order to protect the identity of my participants. Principle and parent were contacted with information regarding how I was going to collect my research and what the research study entailed. In order to maintain confidentiality, all interviews and surveys were conducted inside my classroom and/or through phone. The use of credible and scholarly research was used throughout my study in order to determine common themes related and background information related to my research question.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to analyze the impact inclusion has on second grade students with disabilities. I found throughout my data collection that student-perceptions and attitudes took a major role in determining the type of impact inclusion has had on these students. Inclusion has become a 21<sup>st</sup> century utopia in the education world. There has been an educational phenomenon that inclusion will be the answer to meeting the entire spectrum of students' social and academic needs. Not only is this type of setting become more recognized, but it is also becoming more desired in schools today. After collecting the data over a 4 week time span, I prepared, explored, coded, developed themes, with intent to validate my findings (Clark & Creswell, 2015, p. 354). As a result of my data analysis, I was able to develop further implications regarding the impact literacy has on students with disabilities.

#### **Exploring the Data**

After all of my data were collected, I read through and sorted all of my findings and notes and begun the process of analyzing the data by hand. According to Clark and Creswell (2015), an analysis of the data by hand consisted of reading, marking and dividing the data by hand. I

indexed themes with various highlighted colors. The preliminary exploratory analysis (Clark & Creswell, 2015) consisted of an exploration of the data to obtain a general sense of the data. I read through all 8 interviews and marked similarities and common themes found in the participants' answers to the questions. Throughout the preparation and exploring phase, notes and thoughts were recorded by hand in order to account for my ideas and theories related to themes deriving from the data.

### **Coding the Data**

I used a coding process for interpreting and analyzing the data I collected from the interviews. According to Clark and Creswell (2015), the coding process enables the inquirer to make sense of the database by dividing it into segments and codes, and examining the codes for overlap and redundancy (p.281). Once several codes were determined, broader themes were then examined as a means to make sense of my data.

I used a pink highlighter to indicate any similar findings from all three of the data collectors as a way to determine any common themes. I then broke down the commonalities and used different colored highlighters to indicate different findings. I used a green highlighter to indicate positive attitude towards inclusion, a blue highlighter to indicate academic challenges in an inclusive classroom and a yellow highlighter to indicate student preference between this academic school year and last. I was conscious of any new themes and common occurrences and remained an open investigator while also influenced by my literature review.

### **Developing Themes and Validation**

As a result of the coded data, I was able to develop common themes across the sources of qualitative data. I came to find that there were three reoccurring themes that resonated throughout the data. The following themes were found: a) Second grade students with disabilities

preferred this year compared to last year, b) the participants faced academic challenges being in an inclusive setting this year, and c) parents had a positive perception of inclusion for their child.

### **Finding One: Participants Preferred this Year Compared to Last Year**

The interview given to the three student participants consisted of six questions related to inclusion and literacy lasting about 10-20 minutes each. The questions consisted of the following: *What do you like in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade? What do you like least about 2<sup>nd</sup> grade? Who are your friends? How do you feel about coming to school this year? How did you feel about coming to school last year? How do you feel about reading and writing this year?*

Based on the analysis and coding of my data, I found that all three students like this year's inclusion classroom more than last year's self-contained special education classroom. The three student participants that took the interview were placed in a 12:1:1 (12 students, 1 teacher, 1 aid) setting in first grade. The decision was made to take these three students out of the 12:1:1 special education placement and place them into an inclusive classroom in second grade.

When asked the question, "How do you feel about coming to school this year?" all three students answer positively. The following list includes common words used by the students to describe their feelings: good, happy, excited. When asked to elaborate on why they felt that way, the participants thought that school this year in an inclusive classroom was "super fun" and exciting because they were able to see and meet new friends. Some of them thought that this year was fun because students had classroom jobs and because there was "stuff" hanging on the wall.

When asked the question, "How did you feel about coming to school last year?" all three student answer negatively. The following list includes common words used to describe their experiences and feelings: not happy, not good, mad, not nice, bad, yelling. When asked to elaborate on why they felt that way, all three participants brought up the teacher they had last

year and how they did not feel positively about her. They all conveyed that the teacher was, “not nice” or “yelled all the time.” The participants also mentioned that the other students in the classroom were “naughty.” Below are comments made by the participants about first grade:

Evan: “The boys were naughty. Not me and Lily. I didn’t like them”

Lily: “My teacher told me to be quiet and yelled at me for no reason.”

Max: “They were sort of bad. Someone kicked their shoe on the roof.”

I also asked each of the participants to draw a picture of school last year and school this year. They were not given any other direction. The figures below represent each of the student participants’ drawings.



*Figure 4.1.* Lily’s drawings of first grade (picture on the left) and second grade (picture on the right)

Figure 4.1 is a picture drawn by Lily. When asked to describe her picture, she had emphasized that in second grade there are more girls for her to talk to and play with than there were in first grade.



Figure 4.2. Max's drawing of first grade (picture on the right) and second grade (picture on the left)

Figure 4.2 is a picture drawn by Max. Max explained that in his picture of first grade, a boy was kicking his show on the school roof.

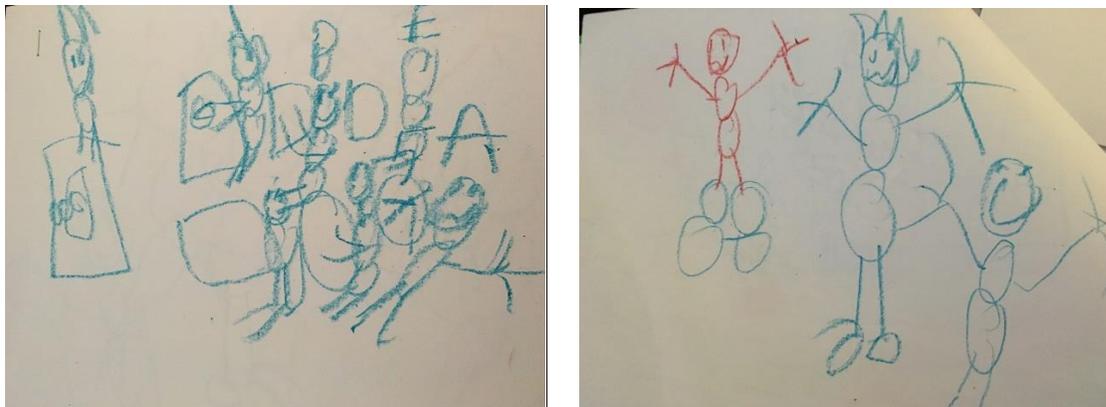


Figure 4.3 Evan's drawing of first grade (picture on the left) and second grade (picture on the right)

Figure 4.3 is a picture drawn by Evan. Evan pointed out that in his picture of first grade, there were many boys and each boy sat in his own desk. He quickly pointed out one particular

boy in the picture who did not make good choices throughout the school year. In his picture of second grade, he drew his three best friends in the class. Ironically, the persons in the picture are of him, Lily and Max.

Based on the responses and drawings that were given by each of the student participants, I noticed that when asked about first grade last year, each student immediately turned to a negative feeling and/or experience that occurred; however, when asked how they felt about school this year –or second grade –students had something positive to say and/or a positive experience to tell.

### **Finding Two: Participants Face Academic Challenges**

According to Fuchs, Fuchs, Compton, Wehby, Schumacher, Gersten and Jordan (2015), specialized intervention is a very different instructional model than is typically practiced in the general education settings where inclusion occurs. Through student interviews, parent interviews, and student surveys, I found that students with disabilities will and have faced challenges being in an inclusive classroom in second grade this year.

#### **Parent Interviews**

When I asked parents, “What are your doubts about an inclusive setting for your child?” All parents conveyed their concern with how challenging inclusion may be for their child. Parents also had concerns with how much their children seemed to be struggling and questioned whether or not their child would ever be able to catch up with the rest of their peers in second grade. According to a study done by Palmer, Fuller, Arora & Nelson (2001), parents also felt the same concern on whether or not their child’s needs could be met in a classroom with an emphasis on academics and core curriculum.

I also asked parents how they thought their child's literacy skills were affected being in this type of classroom environment (inclusion), and they all noticed that their child's personal language has grown. Parents noticed their child having more conversations with peers, improved comprehension, and improved reading and writing.

### **Student Interviews**

When I asked students how they felt about reading and writing this year, they all said they enjoyed reading and writing. Max realized that sometimes he becomes distracted during reading, but enjoys writing because he can write a lot. Max also explained that last year he did not write much because there was not enough time. In a survey given to students, data showed that students felt negatively about school being easy.

Even though students' feelings about being in an inclusive classroom this year were positive, both parents and students showed concerns of academic challenges.

### **Finding Three: Parents' Positive Perception and Satisfaction of Inclusion**

When I conducted my interviews with all five parents, I noticed a common theme within all of my interviews, and that theme was that all parents have a positive outlook on inclusion and simply want the best for their child –and many of them believed that this setting would give them just that. When parents were asked what appeals to them most about this setting, many of them responded with positive remarks. Some parents thought that this setting was the best setting for their child to be in. They believe that inclusion provided their child with positive social experiences. Tichenor, Heins and Piechura-Couture (2000) found that parents are generally in favor of an inclusive classroom. Parents of this study reported that their child had an increase in self-esteem, social skills and academic achievement (Tichenor, Heins & Piechura-Couture, 2000).

Many parents conveyed their concern for their child socially in a 12:1:1 special education setting. They felt that the behaviors they experienced last year in the 12:1:1 room with students other than their own negatively affected their child. Most parents explained that if they had the choice, they rather have their child in an inclusive setting next year compared to being back in a 12:1:1 classroom setting.

All parents made a point to say that they believed this year has been going well for their child. Even though academically they are being challenged, all parents felt satisfied with how the classroom was run, expectations of the classroom and suitability of the classroom. Parents believed that they have seen academic and social growths. Parents felt that their child was satisfied and in turn, they felt *satisfied*.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

#### **Conclusions**

The three central themes found throughout my research are that a) student participants preferred this year's inclusion classroom compared to last year's self-contained special education setting, b) student participants face academic challenges and c) parents of students with disabilities have a positive perception and scarification of inclusion. The themes determined support and rationalize the impact inclusion has on students with disabilities. As a result of my data analysis, exploration and coding of my collected data, I was able to rationalize, support and develop several conclusions based on my findings. They are that a) inclusion provides students with social experiences and opportunities, b) parents of students with disabilities prefer inclusion for their children, c) classroom climate affects students' perceptions and feelings about school, d) inclusion is an academic challenge for students with disabilities, and e) classroom teachers play a major role in the success of inclusion.

**Inclusion provides students with social experiences and opportunities.** My first conclusion is that inclusion provides students with and without disabilities social experiences and opportunities throughout the school day. Inclusion helps foster the development of friendships, enhanced self-respect and provided peer-models (Schoger, 2006). Even though Evan, Lily and Max have learning disabilities, they are all indeed still children, and all children benefit from desired experiences (Schoger, 2006). Throughout my data collection, I learned that Evan, Lily, and Max all benefited socially. I asked all parent participants the following question when interviewed: *How has this setting affected your child socially?* All responses to this question were positive. Many parents felt that inclusion has benefited their child in many ways. The following responses were given: talks more about friends and relationships made at school, interactions outside of school have increased and verbal communication has improved overall.

Inclusion provides both students with and without disabilities the opportunity to have social experiences and opportunities throughout the school day being that there are more students with diverse needs immersed throughout the classroom all day. Two of out the three participants felt positive about having many friends in second grade based on the result of the survey given to them. Also, throughout my informal observations, all three participants were found choosing to play in a small and/or large group during recess. According to Schoger (2006), students learn how to be friends with people who are different from themselves, and inclusion has done just that for Evan, Lily and Max.

**Parents of students with disabilities prefer inclusion for their children.** My second conclusion found throughout my study is that parents of students with disabilities preferred inclusion for their child. According to a study done by Peck, Staub & Gallucci (2004), it was found that parent perceptions of inclusion and its impact on their child's social and emotional

development were mostly positive. The same was found throughout my study. All three sets of parents had positive opinions when it came to asking them how they felt about inclusion. The following question was asked during the interview: *What appeals to you about this setting [inclusion] for your child?* Hope, dedication, and structure were common words found in the responses from parents. The following responses were made by parent participants when asked what is appealing about inclusion for their child:

- I have hope that Lily will grasp on to the academics.
- I like the social setting. She learns from her peers and her two teachers are dedicated to help her.
- I like the class size –it’s bigger. I am more aware of what Evan is doing this year. I wasn’t aware last year.
- This year is much more suitable for Max as far as behavior. Last year, Max would question why he was there [self-contained classroom].
- Personally, I was singled out in high school for being in a self-contained classroom and I never forgot it. I think this is the best setting for him right now. He has a more of a wanting to learn this year.

During interviews with parents, I found that even though parents felt hopeful and positive about inclusion, they also had their doubts about inclusion for their child. Many parents’ doubts came from their awareness of how challenging this year has been and their concerns of their child being able to catch up. Even though parents had their doubts, their positive feelings and attitudes towards inclusions outweighed any doubts they felt.

**Classroom climate affects students’ perceptions and feelings about school.** My third conclusion is that classroom climate affects students’ perceptions and feelings about school.

Tetler & Baltzer (2011) found in their study that students' positive experiences were related to a learning environment that was adapted to their needs. During the parent interview conducted during my data collection, I found that parents were satisfied with how the classroom was being run this year. As stated earlier, parents made it clear that they preferred inclusion for their child. When students were given both the survey and interview, I found that Evan, Lily and Max all had a more positive experience in second grade compared to first grade. Both of the following questions were asked during the interview: *How do you feel about coming to school this year? How did you feel about going to school last year?* When both of these questions were asked, it was evident that all three student participants preferred this year compared to last year. The following words were used in their responses when asked the question of how they felt about coming to school this year: happy, excited, good, fun. When asked about how they felt about going to school last year, the following words were used to describe how they felt: mad, bad, not happy, not good.

When students were asked to elaborate on why they felt the way they did, many students responses were that in second grade, there were more things hanging around the room, they were able to have classroom jobs, and teachers were nice. When students were asked to elaborate on why they felt the way they did about first grade, their responses were that the students were bad, the teacher yelled a lot, and the teacher was angry and made everyone mad. The atmosphere of the classroom plays an important role in how students feel about school. When the classroom environment was a positive one, my participants felt positive about school and when the classroom atmosphere was negative, they felt negative about school.

**Inclusion is an academic challenge for students with disabilities.** My forth conclusion is that inclusion is an academic challenge for students with disabilities. Sermier Dessemontet and

Bless (2013) found throughout their research that inclusion in a general education classroom is an appropriate alternative to education for students with learning disabilities. They (Sermier Dessemontet & Bless, 2013) found that inclusion allows students with disabilities to make more or as much progress in their academic achievement. I found throughout my research that Evan, Lily and Max have faced and continue to face academic challenges in second grade. An inclusion classroom works at the pace of a general education class would and the academic pace is much faster compared to a self-contained classroom. Throughout parent interviews and student surveys, I found that my student participants and their parents were very aware of how challenging this year has been for them. The following question was asked during interviews with parents: *How has this setting affected your child academically?* All parents expressed that they were aware of how challenging this year has been for their child; however, parents also expressed that even though their child is still behind academically, they have seen academic growth being made this year.

Evan, Lily and Max also expressed their awareness of the challenges they face in school this year. Each student participant was given a survey to fill out independently. They were to color the smiley faces to express their feelings about several phrases for example, one phrase states, *School is easy*. Two of out the three participants colored in the sad smiley face to represent negative feelings about the phrase. All students expressed negative feelings within the following phrases when filling out the survey: *I like to write* and *I like to read with my friends*. Even though all 3 student participants face academic challenges this year as they try to keep up with their fellow peers, they all have made academic progress with hopes they will continue to do so in the future.

**Classroom teachers play a major role in the success of inclusion.** My final conclusion is that classroom teachers play a major role in the success of inclusion. According to a study done by Gokdere (2012) classroom teachers have a strong role in terms of classroom climate and behaviors in any classroom condition but, especially in the classrooms with students with disabilities. The effect of teachers is quite significant in successfully implementing inclusion (Gokdere, 2012). I found throughout my data collection that the classroom teachers impacted student and parent perceptions of school this year. During student interviews, student surveys and parent interviews, I found that both parents and students expressed positive feelings and attitudes towards both the special education teacher and the general education students. When I asked parents how we [teachers] can best support your child, many expressed that they were satisfied with what they have seen and one parent stated, “keep doing what you’re doing.” Students also expressed their positive feelings towards their teachers. One student remarked, “I am glad to be here in your classroom! You are super nice.” Classroom teachers have the role in meeting the needs of children in classroom, establishing and maintaining healthy interactions in classroom, and integrating the children with special needs into classroom (Gokdere, 2012).

**Summary of Conclusions.** What I hoped to accomplish by the end of this study was to determine the perceptions and explore the attitudes of students with disabilities and their parents in regards to inclusion. I determined the following conclusions: inclusion provides students with social experiences and opportunities, parents of students with disabilities prefer inclusion for their children, classroom climate affects students’ perceptions and feelings about school, inclusion is an academic challenge for students with disabilities, and classroom teachers play a major role in the success of inclusion were all conclusions found throughout my study. These

conclusions are all closely relevant and related to the perceptions and attitudes of students with disabilities and their parents in regard to inclusion.

### **Implications**

The following implications were developed in regard to my own teaching, student learning and families: a) team up with parents, b) get your students' input.

**Team up with parents.** Teachers and students benefit from keeping parents involved throughout the school year. According to Swick and Hooks (2005), the decision of placement for children with disabilities is not an easy one for parents to make. Additionally, when teacher and parents collaborate, both are better able to provide support that will lead to a positive educational placement (Swick & Hooks 2005). There are several benefits that can come from parents and teachers teaming up. When parents and teachers are able to work together as a team, the needs of the children are better met within the classroom. Clear expectations and communication is key in developing a relationship between parent and teacher. In order to involve and support parents, it is essential to provide parents with insight and understanding as they work with schools to provide their child with the best education possible (Swick & Hooks 2005).

**Get your students' input.** Throughout my data collection, I was able to get to know all aspects of my student participants. Before beginning my research, I would spend my work days focusing on getting through my lesson plans and not truly taking the time to get to know my students. According to Vanderklift and Kunc (2013), if you want to get to know your students, you have to talk to people who have the most information and who spend the most time with the student. That person who spends the most time with the student is the student him or herself (Vanderklift & Kunc, 2013). I found that when teachers take the time to understand students'

personality, strengths and weaknesses, it becomes easier to support those students inside the classroom, as they are more apt to know what works and what does not work for each student. I found that when I was interviewing my students, I was only just beginning to truly understand them. Once I was able to have a conversation and learn about them as a learner, it became that much easier to implement teaching strategies that will help make my students successful.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of my study were that I only conducted my research with a small group of students and parents and therefore, may not be relevant to all students with disabilities and their parents. Another limitation was the time. This study was only conducted within a 4 week time period.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

A recommendation for further research is to focus on the perceptions and feelings of students with disabilities in a self-contained classroom setting. Now that I have determined findings and conclusions based on the perceptions and feelings of inclusion, I would like to further my research into a self-contained classroom setting. Another recommendation for further research is to study the perceptions and feelings of students without disabilities and their parents in regard to inclusion. I would like to get students without disabilities and their parents' perceptions of how they feel about being in an inclusion setting with students who have different academic and social needs than they may have.

### **Closing**

As I observed and worked with these students on a day- to- day basis, I could not help but to think of ways in which these students could be most successful in my classroom. I also could not help but wonder about how these students' literacy behaviors would be and had been

impacted since being placed in a general education classroom setting. The purpose of my study was to determine the perception and explore the attitudes of three students with disabilities and their parents in regards to inclusion. My research led me to three central themes based on the exploration and coding of my findings: student participants preferred this year compared to last year. Student participants face academic challenged. Lastly, parents of students with disabilities have a positive perception of inclusion. The themes determine, support and rationalize the impact inclusion has on students with disabilities.

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