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A different perspective on inclusion

Amy E. Hill

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Department

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First Advisor

Phil Smith, Ph.D.

Second Advisor

Carole Gorenflo, Ph.D.

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A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON INCLUSION

By

Amy E. Hill

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Phil Smith, Ph.D., Supervising Professor

Carole Gorenflo, Ph.D., Honors Advisor

Michael Bretting, Ph.D., Department Head

James A. Knapp, Ph.D., Honors Director

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
A Different Perspective on Inclusion.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
What is Inclusion?.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
What the Law Says About Inclusion	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Parent’s Perspective on Inclusion.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Perspectives on Inclusion: Parents of Students Without Disabilities ..	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Perspectives on Inclusion: Parents With Students With Disabilities..	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Student’s Perspective on Inclusion.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Perspectives on Inclusion: Students Without Disabilities	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Perspectives on Inclusion: Students With disabilities ...	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Benefits of Inclusion.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
How to Improve Inclusion	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Conclusion	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Variables Affecting the Outcome	Error! Bookmark not defined.
References.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Appendix.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.

Abstract

Nineteen parents and students were interviewed in fifteen different interviews. Participants were asked a series of questions to explore their perspectives on the inclusion of children with disabilities in general education classrooms. Their responses were recorded via tape recorder and written documentation. Parents of children with and without disabilities felt that inclusion is beneficial socially and developmentally to all involved. Students without disabilities do not mind having children with disabilities in their classroom.

A Different Perspective on Inclusion

This thesis project is meant to portray the positives and negatives of inclusion through the eyes of those who are not running the classroom, but yet are a very important factor in the education of students with disabilities. They are the ones whose opinions and perspectives are so often left out when it comes to inclusion: parents and students. Parents, whether their children have disabilities or not, and students with and without disabilities are directly affected by the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. For this reason, it is essential to hear what they have to say. If inclusion is to be successful, all participants must collaborate, and everyone who is affected should be involved in the decision making.

There is plentiful research in regards to teachers' and administrators' views on inclusion (Smith, in press). This thesis, therefore, explores how parents and students, both with and without disabilities, feel about including students with disabilities in general education classrooms. By interviewing these parents and students, a clearer picture was drawn on inclusion. This picture helps answer the questions teachers and administrators have but never ask: parents' and students' true feelings about inclusion.

As educational trends change, so do the perspectives of administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Changes in special education practices affect more than just special education students, teachers, and support staff; they affect the school community as a whole. Professors around the world write books on these changes, many of which they have experienced first hand while they were teachers or administrators. Many of the perspectives parents hold on these changes can be found on internet support sites. The

goal of this paper is to capture the thoughts parents and students have on a special education issue that is forever growing: inclusion.

I was able to interview six parents of children without disabilities and seven parents of children with disabilities. Six children, half with disabilities and half without, were also interviewed. Since the interviews were recorded on tape, I was able to go back and listen more closely to the responses of the participants. Much of the information the participants provided was very similar to what has been published in books about inclusion. One surprising item that was noted was the positive effect parents of children without disabilities thought students with disabilities had on their children and the other children in the class.

Consistent results from most parents of children without disabilities found an overwhelmingly positive take on inclusion. They felt that children with disabilities should be included in general education classrooms as much as possible, depending on the child's specific needs. These parents were more willing to include students with less severe disabilities. They believe many students with multiple disabilities need more attention than what a typical general education teacher can provide. Parents who did not have children with disabilities also noted that educating students with disabilities can be done effectively if the "right type of teacher" is in place. Parents of children without disabilities overwhelmingly stated that they feel having a child with disabilities in their child's class is beneficial in many ways. All of the parents felt that the benefits of inclusion outweighed the negatives.

Almost all parents of students with disabilities did not want the full inclusion for their child. Rather, they wanted their child to be educated at "their level" and for the

betterment of their individual future. One parent stated that she felt safer with her child in the special education classroom because the teacher understands how medications and seizures affect his body. The parent who has her child completely included reminded me that inclusion is real life.

Ways that parents said they wanted their children with disabilities to be included was by helping them to feel like they are a part of the school community, which is not always an academic type of inclusion. These parents believed their child would benefit more from social interactions in extra curricular type activities rather than the classroom environment.

Results revealed much support for inclusion of children with disabilities in the general education classroom. However, both groups of parents supported inclusion only if the necessary supplementary services and supports are in place.

Below is a table describing the participants and their relationships.

Pseudonym	Gender(s)	Age(s)
Mr. & Mrs. Lowe	Male & Female	
Lauren Kirkendall	Female	9
Mr. & Mrs. Kirkendall	Male & Female	
Mrs. Jacobs	Female	
Bryan Joyner	Male	11
Mrs. Joyner	Female	
Mike Applegate	Male	16
Mrs. Applegate	Female	
Mr. & Mrs. Rank	Male & Female	
Melanie Mitchell	Female	10
Mrs. Mitchell	Female	
Molly Robinson	Female	14
Mr. & Mrs. Robinson	Male & Female	
Mrs. Mueller	Female	
Jake Mueller	Male	21

What is Inclusion?

To fully explore the issue of inclusion, we need to understand what it means.

Inclusion is not just one thought or idea; it's a combination of these. There is no clear consensus on the meaning of inclusion (Smith, 2007; in press). Sapon-Shevin (2007) defines inclusion as a series of questions which ask about access, cultures, and beliefs. She believes that it also involves ideas like generating strategies together, valuing multiple forms of communication like sign language or communication devices, and getting all members of the school community engaged in the discussion of inclusion.

These questions and ideas show how inclusion requires a collaborative, team effort, with all involved working together to make the school community a universal setting for all learners. Inclusion is not just one teacher, or two teachers, it's the whole school. Everyone needs to be on board. The whole school needs to believe the same idea. The whole school needs to be an inclusive environment.

Inclusion is also more than just being in the general education classroom, "it is being included in life and participating using one's abilities in day to day activities as a member of the community" (Tomko, 1996). There is a significant difference between "being there" and "being included." I can go to the practices of a volleyball team, but unless I am going through the drills, I am not involved, I am just there. The school environment needs to learn and use the abilities of children with disabilities. Utilizing these strengths will help strengthen inclusion and benefit all participants.

As previously mentioned, children with disabilities can physically be in the general education classroom, but unless they are involved in activities and learning, they are not included. Getting students with disabilities involved takes effort. Inclusion is not

“simply dumping students in regular classrooms without addressing issues of exclusion, teasing, curriculum modification, [and] peer support...” (Sapon-Shevin, 2007, p. xv). A child cannot be involved, and therefore, cannot be included, if the proper supports are not in place. Again, a child with disabilities would just physically be there. Proper supports and preparation need to be considered when including children with disabilities into the general education classroom (Smith, in press).

One idea from the Inclusion Network which helps to define inclusion states, “Inclusion is about living full lives - about learning to live together” (2008). During my interviews, parents of children with disabilities mentioned that inclusion was important because it taught their children how to interact with others. They feel this is important because after school, people with and without disabilities will still all be living and interacting together in society. Inclusion teaches children with and without disabilities how to live together in the real world.

What the Law Says About Inclusion

Now that we know how professionals, parents, and the community define inclusion, we need to understand what the federal law says about inclusion. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997, states that "...students with disabilities are to be educated in the least restrictive environment" (IDEA, 1997). So what do the words, "least restrictive environment" really mean? Without a concrete definition, the phrase "least restrictive environment" is subjective. Since "least restrictive environment" can be interpreted various ways by parents, educators, administrators, and others, the act further goes on to define a least restrictive environment:

"(5) LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT-

(A) IN GENERAL- To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily" (IDEA, 1997).

The first important part of the definition to mention is "to the maximum extent possible". How does one determine what is possible? What are the limits for possible? Should there be limits?

The next important part of that definition is “educated with children who are non disabled”. This means that first and foremost, the education of a student with disabilities begins in a general education classroom. Research is clear that students who are taken out of their general education classroom for special education services have worse academic outcomes than those who remain in general education classrooms, and that this effect is greater for students with more significant disabilities (Smith, in press).

The last and truly most important part of the definition is, “removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily”. This is when trial and error begins to play a role in the placement of a child. Children with disabilities must first be provided the opportunity to learn in the general education environment. They must also be provided with necessary supplementary supports and services. Often, children with disabilities are dumped into a general education classroom with no supports, and so are doomed for failure. Inclusion can happen when we follow the law and provide the necessary supplementary supports and services.

When it comes to the education of children with disabilities, we must follow the law. However, who determines when education in a general education classroom is not achieved satisfactorily? After interviewing seven parents of students with disabilities, it appears that the placement of a child with disabilities is determined by parents or school personnel. What would the child with a disability choose? How included do they really want to be?

The Parent's Perspective on Inclusion

Adults have an important role in the lives of children: "Children learn many messages from how we, as adults, respond to differences. What we say matters, but what we *do* matters even more" (Sapon-Shevin, 2007, p. 47). Parents, in particular, play very influential roles in the lives of their children. This is why I felt it was important to interview both the parents of students without disabilities and the parents of students with disabilities.

Thirteen parents were interviewed in nine separate interview sessions. If it was possible, the parents were interviewed together and gave their responses either individually or as a couple. Six of the parents were parents of children without disabilities. The other seven were parents of children with disabilities. Below are some common themes from responses by parents of children without disabilities.

Perspectives on Inclusion: Parents of Students Without Disabilities

The ages of the school-aged children of the parents interviewed range from five to seventeen. All of the families had more than one child. The average number of children in the families interviewed was three.

The Kirkendall's (all names are pseudonyms) have three children, ages twelve, nine, and seven. I interviewed them along with their nine year old daughter, Lauren, who does not have a disability.

I also interviewed the Jacobs', who have two children, ages five and three; and the Mitchell's who have three children, ages ten, eight, and eighteen months, with their daughter, Melanie. The Robinson's were the largest family interviewed with children

aging at ten, twelve, fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen. Their daughter, fourteen-years-old, Molly, was interviewed for this project as well.

The grades of the children of the parents interviewed range from kindergarten to twelfth grade. The kindergarten student is a Jacobs. A second, fourth, and sixth grader belong to the Kirkendall's. Another family with three children, the Mitchell's, have children in fifth and third grades; the youngest is only eighteen months. The Robinson's children are in the fifth, seventh, ninth, tenth, and twelfth grades. All together, seven of these children are in elementary school, two are in middle school, and three are in high school.

All of the families, except for the Jacobs', know of children with disabilities who are included into their children's classes. All of these families have two or more children but not all of the children have students with disabilities in their classes. At least five of the twelve (42%) school-aged children have students with disabilities in their class. These five children have anywhere from one to three students with known disabilities included in their general education classrooms.

Only the Kirkendall's fourth grade child's class, and the Mitchell's fifth grade child's class, said the students with disabilities spent most of the time in general education classrooms. Another child in the Kirkendall's fourth-grade child's class was included for some of the time. Mr. and Mrs. Robinson said that one child was included in the general education fifth grade classroom some of the time while another child was not very included. Mrs. Jacobs' does not know of any children with disabilities in her child's class. Her son is in a kindergarten class at a school in the district with a low

population of children with disabilities. No child was fully included into the general education classrooms of the students whose parents were interviewed.

Many parents did not know exactly in which academic content areas students with disabilities were included. Almost all children with disabilities, according to the parents, were included in all of the specials (physical education, art, music, computers, and library). Two children in the Mitchell's fifth-grader's class were not included in physical education due to physical and other health impairments.

The content areas the fifth graders in Melanie Mitchell's class were included in were English language arts (ELA), science, and social studies. These children were not included in math or writing. They spent much time in their special education classroom to work on part of ELA.

The Robinson's said that the children in their fifth grade child's class were included in all specials. One girl was included in math and other unknown subjects. One child, who was not very included, came in for the last half hour of class for a flexible recess.

The child who was included for some of the time in Lauren Kirkendall's class was included at lunchtime and in all specials: physical education, technology, art, and music. This child spends no academic time in the general education class. However, the student who was mostly included was involved in academic subjects; the specific content areas are unknown to the Kirkendall's.

All of the parents felt that the benefits of having a student with disabilities in their child's class far outweighed the negatives. Some of the benefits mentioned included:

tolerance of others, understanding the differences between all people, exposure to differences, compassion, and sensitivity towards people with disabilities.

Mr. and Mrs. Kirkendall believe that having a child with disabilities in their children's classes teaches them to not be scared of those who are different. Mrs. Kirkendall was able to give a great example this. One summer, she coached a city softball team. One of the girls at her daughter's school – she has autism – was on her team. All of the girls at her school knew how to act, respond, or ignore her behaviors. The girls from the other two local elementary schools “looked at this little girl like she was from Mars”. Mrs. Kirkendall said these other girls had no idea how to deal with a situation like this, whereas the girls from her school were used to it.

Mrs. Jacobs, looking to the future, thought the benefits of having a child with disabilities in her son's class would be to learn that some students have different needs and ways to complete the same assignment or skill. Mrs. Mitchell thought that a benefit of inclusion is that her child was able to see the children with disabilities as typical, normal fifth grade students with similar interests and abilities. “They are able to see just because they have disabilities, doesn't mean they're that different from them.” She felt that having the exposure to others with disabilities makes her children more compassionate, sympathetic, and grateful of what they themselves are able to do.

Mr. and Mrs. Robinson both felt strongly on the issue of inclusion. While one parent seemed more accepting of inclusion than the other, both agreed inclusion had significant benefits, including giving students without disabilities a chance to be teachers themselves.

Of course, children can learn compassion, tolerance, and that we are all different in other situations than the school classroom, but it is only by working alongside children with disabilities that they really understand how to treat others with significant differences.

The common negative about inclusion described by parents was the possibility of disruptions and lack of teacher attention. Parents felt that having students with disabilities in their child's class could possibly take away the time a teacher was able to with other students.

Mr. and Mrs. Kirkendall noted that the teacher often leaves the classroom for "profile change" meetings. They believe this disruption could negatively affect the student's learning and schedule. With consistent substitute teachers, teacher absences become less disruptive.

Although Mrs. Mitchell has not seen this in her daughter's classroom, she thought that teachers could give students with disabilities more attention, reducing their time with general education students. Mrs. Jacobs predicted that there could be some negative impacts as a result of including a student with disabilities in general education classrooms, depending on the teacher's role and how much additional help was provided in the classroom, as a function of the severity of the child's disability. Mr. and Mrs. Robinson said that disruptive noises from some children would interrupt classroom routines.

Parents felt that their child benefits individually from having students with disabilities in their class because they become more compassionate, understanding, and

sensitive towards the differences in others. They learn how to deal with situations that may be uncomfortable for children who have no had exposure to people with disabilities.

The Kirkendall's believed that each three children benefit from having children with disabilities in their class. They think their children develop patience, learn how to interact with people who have differences, and are forever affected by their experiences with children with disabilities. Mrs. Jacobs also agreed that her sons would be enriched for future years if they are to have students with disabilities in their classrooms. Mr. and Mrs. Robinson believed that their children have become more empathetic and less likely to become adults who hold a prejudice.

None of the parents felt having a student with disabilities in their child's class affected the long term learning of their child. The Kirkendall's do not think that having a student with disabilities has affected their children's learning. They hope that impact on learning is small. Mrs. Mitchell said that her daughter has never complained of not getting the help she needed.

These parents have watched the students with disabilities grow up with their own children. Some felt that having students with disabilities in their child's class actually helped their child to learn the content better because they became teachers themselves. Their children helped the children with disabilities learn the material, which in turn was helped them learn.

In the county where all of the participants lived, there is a developmental center attended by students with sever and multiple disabilities. Since this option is located in the city in which most of the people interviewed live, some parents suggested that this was where students with disabilities should be educated.

Overall, parents of students without disabilities felt that children with disabilities cannot be clumped all together; their education, they said, needs to be evaluated on an individual basis. All agreed that the general education classroom was a great place for students with disabilities to be educated. However, they felt that they should be placed there only if they are capable. They would not want a student with disabilities to be a “hindrance” to the teacher or the students. The parents agreed that the education of a child with disabilities must be individualized and occur where it would be most beneficial to the child.

Mr. Kirkendall felt that children with disabilities required one-on-one teaching, not available in general education classrooms. Mrs. Kirkendall wanted a combination of education for students with disabilities in the general education classrooms as well as in special education settings.

Mrs. Jacobs believed children with disabilities can be effectively included if there are paraprofessionals and aides. If the necessary assistance was not provided, she felt, especially for children with sever disabilities, both they and students without disabilities were being cheated.

“If they are capable, the more they can be with other kids, the better for them, definitely!” Mrs. Mitchell said. “I think it benefits society in general because we need to be more accepting and we need to be part of helping...”

Mrs. Robinson believed that some of the children with disabilities currently included in the general education classrooms should instead attend the developmental center, depending on their cognitive abilities. She believes the developmental center has better facilities to teach students skills they will need to know later on in life.

Mr. Robinson does not completely agree. He said the placement of each child needs to be done on a case-by-case basis and should depend on level of ability determined by a team evaluation. He feels if level of disruptiveness can be controlled, then it is beneficial to everyone to have the student in the general education classroom. When the placement becomes more disruptive than beneficial, it needs to be weighed. Both Mr. and Mrs. Robinson remembered when they were in school and how children with disabilities were “shipped off” and never seen by general education students.

It is very important to learn the perspectives of parents of children without disabilities as well as parents of children with disabilities. Both types of parents are coming to the interview with different beliefs and different struggles. Below are summaries of the responses given to the questions that were asked to the parents of children with disabilities.

Perspectives on Inclusion: Parents With Students With Disabilities

The ages of children with disabilities of the parents interviewed ranged from nine to twenty-one. All of the families of children with disabilities have more than one child. The grades of the children of the parents interviewed ranged from third to twelfth-plus.

Three of the five children’s parents live in one school district while the other two live in a bordering district, both in the same county. The county has a developmental center attended by some children with multiple disabilities.

The Lowe’s have a sixteen-year-old daughter with a disability and an older son who does not. The Joyner’s have an eleven year old son with disabilities, Bryan, as well as other children of various ages and unknown abilities. Mrs. Applegate has three

children, two sons with differing autism spectrum disorders, ages fourteen and sixteen – the older one, Mike, was interviewed – and a thirteen year-old daughter. Mr. and Mrs. Rank have two sons, ages twelve and nine, with differing disabilities. The Mueller's have one twenty-one year old son, James, with a traumatic brain injury, and an older daughter.

Every child with disabilities in these families was included in some way in the general education classrooms. Some children, such as Mrs. Applegate's oldest son, Mike, were more fully included than others. Mrs. Mueller believed the school district is mainstreaming rather than including with her son, about which she was dissatisfied. This means that the school was involving James in the school physically but not socially.

Mr. & Mrs. Lowell's daughter is in a self-contained classroom at the high school. She attends one class with other students in special education. Mrs. Applegate's youngest son and the Rank's oldest son are both educated in the same self-contained cognitively impaired classroom, grades six-eight, at the local middle school. They both attend specials with other children without disabilities.

Mrs. Joyner and Mrs. Muller felt that their sons are somewhat included. Mr. and Mrs. Rank believe their younger son is fully included, but receives resource room assistance when needed. Mrs. Applegate also felt that her sixteen-year-old son is fully included, though he is educated in government and math within a resource room because of the slower pace and more in-depth coverage.

Mike Applegate is included in general education classes in the following content areas: business law, physics, English, and college transitions. He is also completing his second half of driver's training. His younger brother is only included in physical education, art, and music.

Mrs. Joyner's son is included in some English Language Arts, science, social studies, health and safety, music, art, and computers. He receives special education services in some reading, math, writing, social skills, and physical education.

Mr. & Mrs. Rank's sons are included differently due to their differences in needs. The oldest son is only included in physical education, art, music, and keyboarding. Their younger son is fully included and can visit the resource room if he needs help.

Mrs. Muller's son, previously included in earth science, reading and math in previous years, is now somewhat included. He attends art and weights and is included into the school social community. The Lowe's daughter is educated out of her self-contained classroom for health. Health is taught by a special education teacher to other students with various disabilities.

Mr. and Mrs. Lowe liked that their daughter is exposed to "normal children", offering her the chance to socialize, make friends, and improve her confidence so she does not feel excluded. They felt that she learns more in general education setting than in a self-contained classroom. Mrs. Joyner appreciated that her son is able to meet different children and learn alongside peers his own age.

"There is no special ed library. There is no special ed. McDonald's®. There is no special ed. department store. There is no special ed. grocery store. You have to learn how to cope out in society," said Mrs. Applegate. She felt that having her children included, whether it is academically or socially, with the aides and supports, helps them to become more independent. Mrs. Applegate thought that if her son was included more, others would be able to see his abilities which are unknown to those outside of the self-contained classroom.

Mr. and Mrs. Rank felt that the benefits of inclusion to be different for each of their boys. They believed that the benefit of inclusion for the eldest son is social, while his younger brother benefits academically. The most prevalent benefit Mrs. Mueller believed James receives is his exposure to real life and real people.

Though inclusion has many benefits, parents also felt that it also comes with negatives. “Some people don’t know how to treat the disabled children...they feel the need to tease or make fun of them,” Mrs. Lowe stated. Mr. Lowe added that sometimes, children with disabilities cannot keep up with material being learned, and that might cause the child to feel uncomfortable.

Though Mrs. Joyner believed that while social interaction was a benefit of inclusion, she also felt that it had a downside. Her son sometimes is made fun of in the general education classroom, but does not get made fun of in the special education classroom. When the students make fun of him, they let him know he is different, which her family works very hard at protecting him from.

Mrs. Applegate noted that general education teachers had inadequate training about disabilities and how to make appropriate accommodations or modifications. She believed that some general education teachers think that if a child cannot learn from the typical way of being taught, then they belong somewhere else. “Special ed is a service, not a place,” she said. She also felt that children in general education are not trained about different abilities. This, in turn, sets children with disabilities up for teasing and bullying.

Mr. Rank indicated that peers make fun of his son, exclude him, and pressure him to do things he does not realize are wrong. Mrs. Rank feels very sad because her son does not understand when he's being made fun of.

"I don't think there are any [negatives]," Mrs. Mueller stated, if inclusion is done correctly. She was scared that the inclusion of her son would follow a "dump and hope" model of inclusion. Mrs. Mueller was the only parent interviewed who supported and stressed full inclusion.

For any form inclusion to be effective, supports and services are essential. A paraprofessional is available at the Lowe's high school. The supports in place for Bryan Joyner are teacher collaboration, a supportive principal, and the whole school working together. Both Rank boys attend after-school speech and language therapy because there is currently not a speech therapist at either of their schools. The younger son is able to go to the resource room when needed.

James Mueller has a full time aide, a support hour at end of school, and an electronic communication device in which James chooses the pictures to respond to questions asked, to ask a question, or to tell a story.

Pulling out her son, Mike's, individual education plan, Mrs. Applegate told me of some of the supports provided for Mike's successful inclusion. Some of these include extended time on test and assignments, an extra set of textbooks for home, ALL directions in writing, a copy of notes/lectures, no grade reductions for tardiness, pervious speech and language services, use of computer for written assignments, and periodic team meetings with all teachers.

It is important that the school districts support inclusion. If the administration does not support inclusion, the process of inclusion is made fairly difficult and sometimes impossible. When asked if the school district supports inclusion, the parents answered with a resounding “No!” Most said that they have had to fight with the school district for more and more inclusion, provision of necessary supports and services, and other issues surrounding their child.

Mr. and Mrs. Lowe had to fight to get a classroom for children with cognitive impairments at the high school. The school district expected students with cognitive impairments to automatically attend the developmental center. Students with cognitive impairments rarely entered the high school. The school district expected these children to be excluded completely.

Mrs. Applegate felt that the only reason her older son, Mike, is included, and inclusion is supported by the district, is because of his cognitive abilities. The Rank’s also feel their younger son’s inclusion is only supported by the district because he can function academically alongside his peers.

“This city really does not want to include our kids” Mrs. Rank said. Mr. Rank added that the school district is unwilling to try new approaches and stays with a “one size fits all” approach. The Rank’s found it hard discover what kinds of services the district provides without talking to other parents.

Mrs. Mueller mentioned that the elementary and middle schools in the district have an “Inclusive Initiative” which she does not find very inclusive. Mrs. Mueller insisted on the inclusion of her son after his car accident and coma recovery at seven years old, fourteen years ago.

Special educators appear to adequately meet the needs of families that were interviewed. The Lowe's mentioned that their child's teacher is knowledgeable, and understands about the needs of different disabilities. Mrs. Joyner felt that her son Bryan's special education teacher makes sure he is keeping up with work, and is available for assistance.

Mrs. Applegate believed that the key to the success of her children's education are the team meetings she has with the teachers every few weeks. These meetings keep lines of communication open and act as a proactive measure. The teachers who include James Mueller work hard at engaging him. The teachers who do not try to include him rely on a paraprofessional to do everything for him.

While the Lowe's felt that students with disabilities should learn, "at their level of understanding," Mrs. Joyner said that they should be pushed and expected to achieve. She also felt that if students with disabilities think or feel that they are not normal, they will regress.

"An IEP is an individuals plan for education," Mrs. Applegate stated. She feels this means that the placement of a child with disabilities needs to be done on an individual basis, keeping the student's strengths in mind. She feels children with disabilities should be able to be educated with accommodations and modifications. They should be taught skills they need for life independence; something she feels cannot always be done under the general education curriculum.

The Rank's indicated that the education for children with disabilities is different for each child. They want accommodations and modifications to be made first before a child is removed from a general education classroom. Mrs. Rank believes children with

disabilities should be educated in the school building because, “The more you expose normal children to our children, you change the world.”

“I feel all children, should be included. I don’t care what the disability is. I don’t care how severe it is,” said Mrs. Mueller. She believes in the motto of the inclusive network she runs, “All children, all together, all the time.” She felt that inclusion is a birth right and a civil rights issue. She believes inclusion is more than just education; it is living together in society.

It was important to ask the parents of children with disabilities where they felt most comfortable having their child places. With the low number of children, allowing for more one-on-one contact and education, the Lowe’s feel most comfortable with their daughter’s current placement in a self-contained classroom.

Mrs. Joyner has been able to build a relationship with the physically and otherwise health impaired teacher over the last four years. She was able to see a difference in her son’s self esteem and academics when he came to his current school and enrolled in the program back in first grade. Bryan was able to see he had abilities other children in the class did not have. The special education classroom was also a safe place. Bryan had daily seizures, sometimes multiple seizures. Mrs. Joyner knew that the special education teacher knew what to do if a seizure was to occur.

Mike plans to go to college, so Mrs. Applegate felt most comfortable with him fully included in the high school. She was comfortable with her youngest son in self-contained classroom because he is learning what she thinks he will need when he gets out of school: life skills. She would like his opportunities with non-disabled peers to increase to help his social abilities.

Mr. Rank felt comfortable with where both of his children are currently placed. His older, middle school-aged son is in a self-contained classroom in an old life skills classroom with dishes, stoves, refrigerators, sinks, washers, and dryers. The students in this class can use this equipment and develop necessary life skills. Mrs. Rank would like the school to try more inclusion first with her older son before containing him as much as he is.

Mrs. Mueller would like her son fully included with the paraprofessional stepping back a bit to allow him to do more. She would like him to have access to technology so he can participate in the classroom.

The issue of student security and safety within the classroom weighs a heavy burden on parents. It is not uncommon for parents of children with disabilities to be encouraged to place their child in a special education setting because of the idea that it is the only place the student's needs can be fully met (Sapon-Shevin, p. 5). Most of the parents interviewed felt safest having their child in a special education classroom. The administrators in both school districts do not hold inclusion as a top priority. Many general education teachers are not prepared to have students with disabilities in their class. These teachers do not have adequate training nor do they have the day after day experience with others with disabilities as a special education teacher does.

Parents were asked how they thought inclusion could be done better. They indicated that:

- Teachers need to be properly educated about disabilities so they can better understand and provide the essentials.
- Teachers need to have more opportunities to learn about inclusion.

- Schools should allow and assist with the attendance of children with disabilities at school dances, parties, and social activities.
- Schools need to be more accessible for students with physical disabilities.
- Correctly implemented co-teaching should be in place.
- A Universal Design for Learning can help break down the walls and let all learn together.
- Peer-to-Peer Support is beneficial and necessary to aide in the development of relationships.
- Sensitivity training for staff and general education students would be beneficial and could even limit the bullying issues in schools.
- Acceptance, not tolerance, needs to be taught and believed.
- Communication between the schools and parents needs to improve.
- The child's best interest should be kept in mind and at heart.
- Training of current teachers on how to modify curriculum and accommodate all children.
- Equipment, medical and therapeutic, should be available at each school.

Inclusion can always be improved. And with the improvement of inclusion more students will benefit. As the results of the research showed, parents of students without disabilities believe their children become better people. They feel their child is more understanding, patient, and less put-off by those with disabilities if they are exposed to children with disabilities at school. Sapon-Shevin states, "... it is only within inclusive schools that anyone can become a fully loving and competent human being and citizen".

The Student's Perspective on Inclusion

“Children have an innate sense of fairness and justice” (Sapon-Shevin, 2007, p. 16). Six students were interviewed to capture this justice and fairness. Three of these students did not have disabilities; the other three did.

Perspectives on Inclusion: Students Without Disabilities

Lauren, nine-years old, was in fourth grade. Melanie, ten, was in fifth grade. And Molly, the oldest of those students without disabilities at fourteen-year-old, was a freshman in high school. All had peers with disabilities in their grade, although not necessarily their classes. Melanie has three children with disabilities in her class while Lauren knows of at least one. Molly attends high school in which there is a cognitively impaired classroom where most of the children are also in ninth grade.

The students who are included in Melanie's class participate in some reading, science, social studies, and all specials: music, art, library, computers, health and safety, and one of the three students is included in gym. Molly says her classmates used to sometimes be included in class with assistance and specials in elementary and middle school. She does not have any classes with them anymore. Lauren's classmate is able to do science, social studies, and all specials: physical education, technology, art, and music

When asked if she liked having students with disabilities in her class, Molly said, “I didn't mind having them there.... They are pretty much just like us. They don't really stand out.” Molly sees having students with disabilities in her class as a benefit, that if we get used to people with disabilities at an early age, we are prepared for encounters later on in life.

Melanie says she kind of likes having these boys with disabilities in her class because they are cool. She is not fazed by them one way or another. To her, school with these boys is like school with any other boys. She neither nor dislikes it because it is just the way she is used to it. Lauren likes having a male student with disabilities in her class because she can help him. According to her, one boy with disabilities in her class is very nice, good at answering questions, and learns a lot when he is in class. None disliked having students with disabilities in their classroom.

These three students have been exposed to students with disabilities since they were very young. They have grown up with them just like any other peer in their neighborhood school. Because of this, the three girls without disabilities have had positive experiences with children with disabilities. Melanie says she has learned how to treat everybody the same.

These interviews help to prove how “disability is socially constructed” (Jaeger and Bowman, 2005, p. 11; Smith, 1999; 2006). These three girls really don’t see the children with disabilities in their classes as different. It is the adult society who forms this social construct and passes it down to the younger generations.

To determine how the children with disabilities feel about inclusion, three were interviewed.

Perspectives on Inclusion: Student With Disabilities

I interviewed three male students with disabilities who are eleven, sixteen, and twenty-one years old.

Bryan is the youngest and in fifth grade. Mike is a junior, or in eleventh grade. He is the only student who attends his neighborhood school. The twenty-one year old, James, is a senior-plus in his local high school, which he will attend until the age of twenty-six. Bryan and James are both bussed across town to receive the services needed for their public school education.

Bryan has two teachers: his general education fifth grade teacher and his special education teacher. Mike has seven teachers, just like any other high school student. All of his teachers are general education teachers except for two. James has seven adults providing with educational services at the high school level; he brought up his page on his talking communication device and pointed to the row of people who either teach or assist him while he is at school.

As a fifth grader, Bryan participates in some reading, science, social studies, art, music, computers, health and safety, and library. He works on reading, math, writing, and social skills while he is in the special education classroom. He also participates in the physical education with the other children in his special education teacher's class.

Mike is in five classes with other general education students, including business law, physics, English, and college transitions. He does everything that other students do. The other two classes are still classes that are graduation requirements, government and algebra; he takes them with teachers with special education certification because they are at a "slower pace" and are covered "more in-depth".

James is not currently enrolled in any subject area courses. He is, however, enrolled in weights, art, work study, library/computers, and study hall/homeroom. In art and weights, he is among non-disabled peers.

Bryan says he enjoys his fifth grade teacher's class because they do cool stuff like social studies. Mike does not feel that there is much of a difference between his general education and special education classes. He says, "I don't feel any different when I'm in the general ed. or when I'm in the special ed. I mean, I just feel like I'm still learning no matter what."

James' favorite class, and one he has taken and will continue to take year after year, is art. With a big smile on his face, he showed me one of the pictures he had painted in his art class. His mother told me that art is the most inclusive class in which James is enrolled. James gave the sign that indicated his male work study teacher, one of his special education teachers, is sometimes boring.

Bryan would rather spend his day in his special education teacher's class because he believes he would have more fun. Mike doesn't care where he spends his day. He enjoys all of his classes, regardless if they are special ed. or general ed. James would like to spend his whole day in his art class.

Mike is an advocate for himself and others with disabilities. He said that some of his teachers were hesitant at first to include him when he moved to this city in eighth grade. The current school district indicated that they did not include students with his form of autism in the general education, but his mom was able to show them proof that he could be educated - and that he would be. He is flourishing in all of his classes, getting As in everything but physics! He keeps track of his progress in his classes by meeting with his teachers once a week.

Mike sees that he is included more than other student with disabilities. He believes this is because he can achieve high academically. He wishes more students with disabilities were in the general education classes.

Maurice Azar, a youth literary critic for the community mental health in the said in an interview in 2006/2007, “I believe that all students, no matter what disability they may have, deserve a chance to prove themselves able to learn in a general education environment” (Masterpieces of the Mind). Maurice is not only a youth literary critic, he is a high school junior and an advocate for people with disabilities, and a person with Asperger’s Syndrome. Obviously, he is a student who believes in inclusion. All students are not able to voice their desire to be included in the general education they way that Maurice can. It is our job, as educators to ask and find out where children with disabilities where they would most like to be educated.

The Benefits of Inclusion

Whether the inclusion is full inclusion or partial inclusion, it has benefits for all who are involved. “Students benefit from being educated together” (Vergun and Chambers/U.S. Department of Education, 1995). Through inclusion, we are able to deepen our understanding of those who are different than us which therefore “enlarges our hearts” (Sapon-Shevin, 2007, p. 29). We first have to open our minds to this change and welcome it to happen.

When we allow for inclusion, we are benefiting all involved academically and socially, especially if the students without disabilities interact with their peers with disabilities: “...knowing, accommodating, and building friendships with a diversity of peers benefits all students...” (Hughes and Carter, 2008, p. 8). Everyday, so-called “normal” people interact with one another. People with disabilities interact with people daily as well. Why should we change the school environment to not support the social world around us? “There are no special education McDonalds®,” Mrs. Applegate said.

Mrs. Applegate is a proponent for inclusion because it helps to teach her sons about the real world around them. It allows her sons to interact with people in their city, a critical factor especially for students with communication difficulties who need social opportunities to develop those skills (Downing, 1996, p. 4). General education classrooms enhance social interactions, and Mrs. Applegate, along with other parents of children with disabilities, are keenly aware of this.

All of the parents felt that the benefits of having a student with disabilities in their child’s class far outweighed the negatives. Parents, both with and without children with disabilities, noted that inclusion:

- * Teaches children tolerance and understanding.
- * Teaches children to not be scared of those who are different.
- * Aides in the exposure to differences; to the fact that not all children are the same.
- * Helps others learn that some students have different needs and ways to complete the same assignment or skill.
- * Allows for a child to see the children with disabilities as typical, normal students with similar interests and abilities.
- * Makes children more compassionate, sympathetic, and grateful of what they themselves are able to do.
- * Gives non-disabled children a chance to be teachers themselves.
- * Builds sensitivity.
- * Exposes children with disabilities to children without disabilities.
- * Allows children with disabilities to learn more than they would in a self-contained classroom.
- * Increases socialization, friendships, and improves confidence.
- * Helps children with disabilities to not feel excluded.
- * Helps students with disabilities to become more independent.
- * Helps people without disabilities see the abilities people with disabilities have.

Conclusion

How can we make children with disabilities, who are not fully included, feel more like a member of the class rather than a child who comes in every once in a while?

Parents, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders need to remember that “Inclusion is a process” (Odom, 2002, p. 13). At the same time, as social worker and mother of a college student with cognitive disabilities, Janice Fialka, notes it is important to “nudge the network” (2008). In her article, she talks about how she and her husband used the network surrounding them to aide in the inclusion of their son, Micah. For instance, asking some of the high school students if they would invite a particular student with disabilities to join their group for the prom, like Mrs. Fialka did, would be a way to use a network to our advantage.

I mentioned that if we want inclusion to happen, we need to believe it can and will happen and get in that frame of mind. We need to be supportive and on the same page. We need to believe that the world can be different and step up to the challenge to make the difference (Sapon-Shevin, 2007, p. 55).

When planning for our classrooms, “...we must see all children as individuals with multiple identities and design curricula and instruction that is responsive to many aspects of a child’s life” (Sapon-Shevin, 2007, p. xiii). As one parents of a child without disabilities said, inclusion can not be done effectively if the appropriate supports are not in place. When we dump students in without those supports, we set them up for failure. As teachers, parents, students, and citizens, we need each child to flourish and succeed.

The most important factor to remember when improving inclusion is communication. Inclusion can be improved when the team communicates and works

collaboratively. Communication helps bring people together, and creates one team rather than two; an “us and them”. Not all professionals know the child about whom they are making the decisions, and need to remember that parents live with their child and are aware of abilities that are displayed at home. Professionals should take advantage of opportunity to communicate and provide the parents with information regarding the services that are provided or that are available in the local community.

Variables Affecting the Outcome

The following uncontrolled variables may have played a role in the outcome of the research. As I began to interview more and more participants, I noticed that many of them have a college education. More post-secondary education might cause them to have a different view of inclusion than those without such education.

Another uncontrolled variable that many of the parents interviewed play very active roles in their children's lives. Because of their advocacy role, they might have more knowledge about disabilities and inclusion when compared with their non-involved peers.

The students without disabilities who were interviewed have been going to school with children with disabilities for many years. Their lengthy, uncontrollable relationship with these students may have affected the outcome of the research. However, it could also support the research positively by showing that the effect of including students with disabilities is beneficial to the lives of all children.

Husbands and wives were interviewed together, which might be a hindrance to the responses given by either party. One spouse might have held back their true feelings because his or her spouse has a different view.

Four of the six children were interviewed with the parents in close proximity. Three parents sat at the table while their child was interviewed. Another parent was in the same large room. This factor could affect the outcome of the research because these children could have withheld their true feelings on inclusion. I wonder, especially for those children with disabilities who interviewed with their parents in the rooms if they would have said they'd rather be in the special education classroom against their parent's

wishes. I also wonder if the students without disabilities might have expressed negatively about having students with disabilities in their classes.

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Appendix

The questions that were asked at each interview are as follows:

Questions for Parents of Students *without* Disabilities

What is the age of your child?

In what grade is your child?

Are there any children mainstreamed/included in your child's class? If so, how many?

How would you rate their inclusion level? Fully included, mostly, somewhat included, or not-very included?

Are you aware of what the child(ren) is included in? Example: Math, science, reading/writing, social studies, specials (such as physical education, art, music, etc.)

What do you feel are the benefits of having a student with disabilities in your child's class?

Do you feel there are negatives of having a student with disabilities in your child's class?

If so, what do you believe they are?

Do you feel your child benefits/does not benefit from having a student with disabilities in his/her class? How so?

Do you feel your child's learning is affected by having a student with disabilities in his/her class? How so?

How do you feel most students with disabilities should be educated?

Questions for Parents *with* Disabilities

What is the age of your child?

In what grade is your child?

Is your child mainstreamed/included into general education?

If you could rate the level of inclusion for your child, how would you rate? Fully included, mostly, somewhat included, not-very included, or self-contained?

What is your child included in? Example: Math, science, reading/writing, social studies, specials (such as physical education, art, music, etc.)

What do you feel are the benefits of having your child included in the general education curriculum?

What do you feel are the negatives of having your child included in the general education curriculum?

What supports are in place for your child's successful inclusion?

Do you feel the inclusion of your child is supported by the district for which your child attends?

Do you feel the teacher(s), for which your child is included, successfully meet the needs of your child? How?

How do you feel most students with disabilities should be educated?

Where do you feel most comfortable having your child placed? Why?

Do you think inclusion could be done better? If so, how?

Questions for Students *without* Disabilities

How old are you?

What grade are you in?

Do you know if there are any students with disabilities in your class?

What does the student with disabilities get to do in/with your class?

Do you like having the student with disabilities in your class? If so, what do you like?

Do you dislike having the student with disabilities in your class? If so, what do you dislike?

Questions for Students *with* Disabilities

How old are you?

What grade are you in?

How many teachers do you have?

What do you do in each teacher's class? Gen. Ed? Special Ed?

Do you like being in _____ (gen. ed.) teacher's class with all of the other children? Why or why not?

Do you like being in _____ (special ed.) teacher's class? Why or why not?

In what teacher's room would rather spend your time? Why?