

Inclusive Education in Secondary Schools: Perspectives of Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

This study aims at understanding the perspectives of students with learning disabilities that are placed in general education inclusive classrooms. The main focus of this research is to determine if the students with disabilities feel included by their peers and teachers as active and important members in the class. The qualitative research was conducted using semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with three students with mild learning disabilities in an inclusive English Language Arts class. Observations during a period of three months were also used in this research to obtain student interactions with peers and staff, as well as responsibilities and roles the students maintained. The most significant results were obtained from the interviews with the three subjects in the study. Two of the three students, when asked about disabilities, only associated physical handicaps with the word; they did not think of themselves as having a disability of any kind. The other student commented that she used to have a disability, but since then has been corrected and wasn't disabled anymore. Overall, the students liked their classes and the help they received from the staff. All of the students interacted well with their peers in class; some held classroom responsibilities everyday such as helping with attendance and homework collection.

Keywords: Inclusion, Disabilities, Perspectives, Secondary, and Interactions

Introduction and Conceptual Framework

While I was completing my student teaching semester I noticed that even though I was in two very different settings, I always had at least one inclusive class each day. Students with various learning abilities were placed in one general education class each day. Special education teachers and paraprofessionals were also present in the classroom for additional assistance and collaboration. While teaching the students in the inclusion classes, I often wondered if they felt inferior to or different from their peers, because most of the students with lower learning abilities were either removed from the class during testing or other group work.

One student in particular that made an impression was a male eighth grade student, who had a personal paraprofessional accompany him to most of the classes he attended. One day when she was absent, the students were asked to complete a worksheet in small groups about a topic covered in class. The male student acted as if he were attempting to complete the worksheet and contribute to the group; however, when he turned it in at the end of class, the answers were either irrelevant or blank. When I asked him about his worksheet after class, he said that, "Since Miss L was not here I couldn't do it. People were going too fast and they didn't give me the answers." Since he was a student with a learning disability, I contemplated if I was doing anything to make him feel uncomfortable. I feared that I excluded him or oppressed him in the class, since he did not feel he could do the work alone. If his classmates noticed he was not filling in his worksheet, did they try to help him? Finally, I wondered what he thought and felt about being in a mixed ability classroom.

Since the passing of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, PL 105-17, students with disabilities are placed in the "least restrictive environment" and in a general education classroom, unless their Individual Education Plan (IEP) justifies other arrangements

for instruction (Harris and Katims, 1997). Since inclusive schooling is becoming prominent in our education system, the central goal of this project is to examine the perceptions of students with disabilities who are placed in general education classes.

The central research question that I attempt to address is how students with disabilities perceive inclusive classes. Studies have shown that when students with learning disabilities are placed in general education courses, all students benefit from heterogeneous grouping and learning (Parker, 2002). When students with disabilities are included in activities in the classroom and accepted by their peers, then they will perceive their inclusive classroom as an environment that is useful, valuable and important to their learning and development

There is a growing body of research addressing inclusive schooling issues. This literature addresses the numerous issues from student perceptions of inclusive classrooms to the involvement of students with disabilities in the classroom (Cook-Sather, 2003; Schnorr, 1997; Monda-Amaya and Pavri, 2000; Klingner, 1999; Ring and Travers, 2005). It spans from federal educational policies regarding inclusive classrooms (Cole, 2006, Gartner and Lipsky, 1995), to supporting the increase of inclusive education (Carter and Kemp, 2006; Blancher, 2007; Shah, 2005; Martinez, 2006; Krajewski, 2000; Carrington, 2003). From the degree of inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes (Idol, 2006), to the perspectives of students with disabilities about labels and placements (Fritz et. al, 2000) and from evaluating inclusive schools (Dymond, 2001).

Perceptions of Students without Disabilities

The literature that dealt with students without disabilities and their perceptions of inclusive classrooms was quite abundant and dense: Schnorr (1990), Schnorr (1997) and Cook-Sather (2003), specifically. A central finding of all three studies is that students with disabilities

that are included into the general education classroom are noticed as “different” from other students

A study conducted by Schnorr (1990), describes part-time mainstreaming and how students in the first grade understand mainstreaming. Schnorr (1990) conducted participant observations for most of the school year, as well as unstructured, open interviews with a student named Peter. Peter has been diagnosed with Down’s syndrome and seven years old. He is in a self-contained special education class and joins in a first grade class for daily “specials” and a period in the morning. Other interviews were conducted with the remaining students in the class, as well as the teacher. Through her observations and interviews, Schnorr (1990) found that some of the first grade students did remember Peter’s presence in the classroom. When asked about the ownership of a vacant desk in the room, one of the students remarked that it was Peter’s desk. Several themes that Schnorr (1990) found were that Peter was viewed as an outsider, someone who was not in the class, and a visitor. The students could not seem to understand Peter’s status or place in the classroom because he was only included part of the day. According to Schnorr (1990) the reason why students did not know who Peter was due to part-time membership in the classroom.

In a later study conducted by Schnorr (1997) she used interpretivist research techniques to study four different general education classes in an urban middle school and high school. She used both participant observation and semi-structured interviews with the students in each of the schools. Two general education classes in the middle school were involved in the study: a seventh-grade math class and an eight-grade art class. Both of the classes included one student with a disability (Schnorr, 1997), but the disabilities were not specified. The students with the most severe disabilities were clustered and placed in special education class and some general

education classes (Schnorr, 1997). The two classes that were observed at the high school were an art class and an instrumental band class, where the students ranged from ninth graders to twelfth graders. In these classes, two students with mild to severe disabilities were present (Schnorr, 1997). In the middle school math class and high school band class, the students with disabilities sat in the back of the classroom, in homogenous groups and separated from other students.

The findings of this study determined that from the students' perspective, class membership depended on a particular subgroup the student belonged to while in class. Also when a student joined a class, the student made a conscious effort to make friends and get "in" with individual classmates or specific subgroups, according to what people they were friends with (Schnorr, 1997). Of the four classes that Schnorr (1997) observed, there were six total students with disabilities; with those six, only two students were affiliated with subgroups. It was noted that even though some of the students with disabilities did not belong to subgroups, most of the students acknowledged that they have helped the disabled students, such as helping them wash their hands in art class or asking if a student was doing okay when they showed up looking upset (Schnorr, 1997). Schnorr (1997) concluded that general interactions among the students with disabilities were consistent with the other students in the classes; however, few students with disabilities connected with subgroups or individual students. In addition, students without disabilities do know and acknowledge the students with disabilities, but only a few of the students with disabilities interact daily with the other students. This study shows that the students with disabilities are included in the classroom; however, they are sometimes put in the back of the classroom or they are working alone on projects.

Another study that focused on perspectives of students without disabilities was conducted by Cook-Sather (2003), where she examined three sets of high school students' perspectives on

learning differences, such as inclusion classes. She focused on the inclusion of all students, in age-appropriate general education classes. Cook-Sather (2003), found that a student in the gifted program believed that inclusion was “discouraging to students if they were classed into a lower class” (Cook-Sather, 2003, pg.23). Another student in the gifted program acknowledged that even though he felt somewhat held back, he enjoyed helping his fellow students if they needed it. Other students claimed that students with disabilities would be discouraged and have a difficult time keeping up with everyone else (Cook-Sather, 2003). These were among the comments that were associated with the traditional mode of education (Cook-Sather, 2003). This illustrates apprehension that some students without disabilities may have when they are placed in an inclusion classroom. One female student in an 11th grade general education track identified the challenge of inclusion classes as a product of socialization (Cook-Sather, 2003). The student stated, “We’ve been brought up differently. We’re so competitive. It’s just a whole psychological thing that goes back to Kindergarten” (Cook-Sather, 2003, pg.24). Finally, one student described a fellow classmate who was deaf; she stated, “I learned a lot from him. Just about life and how he deals with different things and it was good for me to be exposed to different types of people” (Cook-Sather, 2003, pg.25). Therefore, students had mixed opinions about the placement of students with disabilities in general education classes.

Perceptions of Students with Disabilities

In the same study conducted by Cook-Sather (2003), she interviewed students with disabilities and their perceptions of inclusive classrooms. One student who was a female student with a disability felt as if the students in the advanced placement classes helped her understand the material in her classes (Cook-Sather, 2003). Also, one student with a disability commented on how welcomed he felt in the classroom and that by being there, it taught acceptance and gave

exposure to differences in people (Cook-Sather, 2003). Overall, students with disabilities felt as if being in the general education classes was a positive influence on them

In a study conducted by Klingner (1999), 4,659 students, with and without disabilities, from grades Kindergarten through grade 12 were participants; 760 students (16%) were labeled with high-incidence learning disabilities. The main data collection procedures consisted of individually administered interviews, focus group interviews, written surveys, questionnaires, and scales (Klingner, 1999). The research was separated into 20 different studies. In one study conducted, students with disabilities were surveyed on adaptations; this survey was also conducted for students without disabilities and the answers from each group were in constant disagreement (Klingner, 1999). The survey found that the students with learning disabilities were much more likely to indicate that it would be fair to give some students a higher report card grade if they show improvement and to grade some students on a different scale (Klingner, 1999). Also, students with learning disabilities were more likely to report that homework was boring or too difficult than students without disabilities (Klingner, 1999). Within the project, “Study 14” (Klingner, 1999), students with disabilities commented on factors that make homework difficult. These included the use of inconsistent language, lack of explanation/directions, lack of questions answered by teachers, no specifications about due dates, overload of assignments (Klingner, 1999).

The data that was collected was both qualitative and quantitative and consisted of research methods such as interviews, surveys, observations, data analysis and scale. Studies, for the majority, consisted of perceptions of those other than students with disabilities (Yssel, 2007; McCray and McHatton, 2007; Schnorr, 1990; Schnorr, 1997; Cook-Sather, 2003), or about inclusion, such as the benefits (Carter and Kemp, 2006) and effective learning strategies for

implementing inclusive education (Krajewski, 2000) In regards to the participants in many of studies, the range was quite diverse. Most of the studies were conducted in the United States, with the exception of three that were conducted in Ireland (Ring and Travers, 2005), South Africa (Yssel, 2007) and Australia (Carrington et. al., 2003).

Gap in Knowledge

This review of inclusion has uncovered studies that address education policies (Gartner et. al, 1995; Cole, 2006), information of learning abilities and special education processes (Hittie and Peterson, 2003) and impacts of inclusion programs on schools (Duhaney et. al, 1999; Dymond, 2001). In addition, several studies have focused on perspectives of students without disabilities (Schnorr 1997; Idol, 2006, Fritz et. al, 2000). Unfortunately, not many studies have focused on perceptions of students with disabilities (Cook-Sather, 2003). Clearly, more research needs to be conducted regarding the impact and perspectives of students with disabilities.

The gap in the research lies with the most important aspect of this topic, which are the students with disabilities and their perceptions of inclusion. It is important to understand whether or not they feel included by their peers and by their teachers. It is also important to understand the needs of students with disabilities and if they are receiving the appropriate assistance and technology to propel learning. Therefore, I hope that by shifting the focus from students without disabilities to students with disabilities, we can learn how to support and accommodate the students so that they are guaranteed success.

Research Methodology

This project aimed to determine how students with disabilities perceive their experiences in inclusive classrooms. The overall design of this project consisted of analyzing interviews conducted with students who have learning disabilities and who were placed in the general

education classes at a secondary school level. This was used to obtain the perceptions of those students who are mostly affected by inclusive classrooms. Observations were also used to determine how the students with disabilities were included into the normal classroom activities, how other students reacted to them, and how the teachers were or were not differentiating instruction.

Defining Inclusion

Federal education policies, such as the reauthorization of IDEA by the United States Congress in 1997, stated that students with disabilities must be guaranteed a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment, and that students have more access to the general education curriculum and reforms (Hittie & Peterson, 2003). In addition, the No Child Left Behind Act, signed in 2002, requires increased participation of students with disabilities in state and district assessments (Doyle, 2003). With these policies in effect, a recent push to incorporate students with disabilities into general education classrooms has been increasing during the last decade. Inclusion refers to incorporating students with various ability levels into the same classroom. According to Idol (2006), inclusive classrooms are places where all students are included in the general education programs. The student is enrolled in general education classes for the entire day. In recent years, there has been growing movement to include all students, regardless of the level of disability, in the life of the school, including regular classes (Schnorr, 1990). According to Cook-Sather (2003), new policies regarding learning differences and abilities refer to the inclusion of all students in age-appropriate general education classes, which by definition is inclusive education.

Although inclusion is becoming more frequent in school districts, there are many forms of inclusion that may be utilized and accepted under federal law. One form of inclusion

incorporates bringing students with mild learning disabilities, such as a reading difficulty, into general education classes, such as English, with the help of a paraprofessional or special education teacher in the classroom for assistance. The students also have the option of going to a different location or receiving extra assistance from their aide during tests or other activities. They also attend a class with a special education teacher, in which they study for tests, do homework, go over lessons and practice skills in which they struggle. Another form of inclusion can include mainstreaming, which usually includes students with mild to more severe disabilities, such as Cerebral Palsy, into the classroom. Mainstreaming has many variations as well, such as part-time or full-time. Part-time mainstreaming, as discussed in Schnorr (1990) involves students with more severe disabilities into only a select number of classes, for example, one per day. In some cases, these students are only mainstreamed and included into classes, such as art or music. For schools with modern technology and options to hire many paraprofessionals for assistance, students with severe disabilities are included into every class with their peers, and the constant aide of others. In my own experience and for the purpose of this research, inclusion is to be viewed as the incorporation of students with multi-level learning abilities into a general education classroom, such as English Language Arts, with the aid of special education teachers

Design and Instruments

This project relies on two instruments: interview and observation. Interviews were used to collect data on how students with disabilities perceive inclusion, while observations were conducted to see how inclusion was actually enacted in class and how interview data compared with the actual events observed. The interviews gave the perspectives of students with disabilities about being in a general education class, as well as school in general. The observations were needed to determine the overall actual inclusion and acceptance of students

with disabilities in the classroom; this included teacher roles as well as student interactions. The primary instrument used in this study was interview. Interviews were used to collect qualitative data about perceptions of inclusion. The interviews were conducted during the students' resource time. The key areas regarding the interviews are in Appendix A. In addition to interview, I observed an inclusion class to see how inclusion was enacted in the classroom. Observation allowed me to collect qualitative data on instruction, interactions between teachers and students, interactions between students, etc. Information regarding observation is available in Appendix B.

Subjects

The school district in which the research was conducted was a rural school district in Central New York. The middle school consisted of grades fifth through eighth and holds approximately 100 students each. The district is made up of 97% Caucasian students, one percent Hispanic, and less than one percent was African American, Asian and American Indian. The district is comprised of families with a socioeconomic status that falls between working middle-class and lower class.

The subjects for this study were drawn from one eighth grade English Language Arts class that included 21 students with varied learning abilities and styles; the class was labeled inclusive because the students in the class had multi-level learning abilities and were integrated into the general education classes. Two special education teachers were also there to aid the students with the lessons and tasks.

There were three students with disabilities who were interviewed one-on-one during resource time. They were labeled with learning disabilities and all had Individualized Education Plans (IEP). Some of the IEP's included extra time for testing, assistance with reading, assistive

technology for reading and speech and a scribe. Of the students who were interviewed, one was female and two were male. (See Figure 1)

Procedure

When arranging to observe the eighth grade inclusion class, several emails and phone calls were exchanged between the teacher and myself and the school principal. She agreed to let me come into the classroom during the early springtime for a length of three months, April and June 2008. Permission was received from those parents or guardians of the students with disabilities in order to be interviewed. To seek permission, I sent home a letter home to inform the parents of my intentions and research project.

Throughout the three months, I observed the class and the way the students interacted with each other. I sat in the back of the room while she taught the class, before I interviewed some students, in order to gain an understanding of the classroom environment and the students in general. While observing each time, handwritten notes were taken about the students' behavior and actions regarding the students with disabilities. Ethnographic notes or timed, detailed descriptions regarding student actions were taken during the 80-minute class block.

The interviews were one-on-one and semi-structured in nature. A small list of question was prepared, where elaboration and tangents occurred during the interviewing sessions. The student and I sat in library, during their resource period. The interviews were captured with a voice-recording device and the data was then transcribed to a word document on a computer. When the interviews were finished, the students were thanked for their participation; the interviews lasted 30-60 minutes.

Data Analysis

In the qualitative research that involved interviews and observations, data analysis was inductive and ongoing throughout the study. As data were collected, ethnographic notes and interview transcripts were examined to determine possible themes and possible relationships between actions and perspectives of students with disabilities in an inclusive general education class. Once the observations and interviews were completed, each observation was read three times, examining commonalities and patterns. In addition, each interview was also listened to and read three times in order to determine common ideas and perceptions the students had. Some relationships were overlapping; therefore, I created larger main categories that coincide with the research's sub-questions. Once the coding was complete, the results were then examined again. Categories regarding interviews and observations are presented in Appendix C

Results/Findings

Description of typical classroom

The classroom where the research was conducted is an eighth grade English Language Arts inclusive classroom; the topics covered during observations included poetry and mythology. The classroom was set up with six rows facing the teacher's desk and the chalkboard. The students sat in alphabetical order; however, Student B and Student A had preferential seating, where they sat in the front row due to a request in their IEP. The female student usually helped the teacher with attendance and tracking homework for the class. The teacher, depending on the lesson, incorporated activities involving the entire class, small group work, reading activities, testing strategies and hands-on work. Two special education teachers were in the room to help those students with an IEP; often during small groups, each teacher would take a mixture of students with various ability levels. Often, the special education teachers took a group of students

to learn in a different, more intimate location in the school. For class discussions and question and answer sessions, the teacher implemented a system called “fickle finger of fate”, where she would use the seating chart to pick a student to answer while her eyes were closed. If asked to read aloud, the student had the option to decline. In my observation only two students declined: Student A and another student with an IEP who was not given permission to be in this study.

Interactions of students with disabilities with instructional staff

A. With general education teacher

The three students in this study interacted well with the general education teacher. One of the students was asked to help with attendance, homework collection and other duties so that the lesson could start as soon as possible. The teacher often commented on the homework or assignment that was due and insisted that any students that needed help should speak to her or one of the special education teachers after class. The teacher often walked around the room and helped any student that needed it. The teacher implemented a system for calling on students, which was explained above called, “the fickle finger of fate”, giving the students an opportunity to answer and read aloud. In addition, if a student did not want to talk or read, she accepted their decline. During an observation, Student A opted not to read aloud and the teacher did not ask any questions and moved on to the next student without hesitation. During a group activity where the students were studying for a vocabulary test, Student A asked if she could work alone with the general education teacher. The teacher and the student walked around to each of the hanging posters with the definitions illustrated on them, and she instructed her on techniques to remember the definitions. If the students were doing work at their seats, the teacher often walked around and gave them positive comments and/or suggestions about their work. The teacher treated

students equally, regardless of their disability if any; the teacher did not make the students with disabilities seem different from their peers in any way.

B. With push-in special education teachers

The two special education teachers in the classroom were push-in teachers, where they come to the class in order to assist students with disabilities that they see once a day in a resource room for additional help. The male special education teacher was present more often than the female special education teacher and all the students in the class seem to connect to him and like him more than the female special education teacher. The male teacher walked around the room during the class, stopping at the various desks of those students with disabilities to assist them with their work or reading. Often during group activities, the special education teachers took a group of students with mixed ability levels. The three students in this study were always placed in a group with one of the special education teachers or a group with the general education teacher. The special education teachers often helped the general education teacher with the lesson by adding in their ideas and activities. The class was generally co-taught by the general education teacher and the special education teachers.

Interactions with students

A. With students with disabilities

The students in this study interacted with each other and other students with disabilities not in this study, but in the classroom during observations. Student B and Student C interacted with each other more than with Student A. The two males often interacted with each other before class started or during breaks or group work. The males often discussed sports or events happening during the week and into the weekend. The female student,

Student A, often kept to herself during group activities. Before class she assisted the teacher with duties and interacted with all students regarding homework and attendance.

B. With students without disabilities

All of the students in this study interacted with students without disabilities often, if not more than those with disabilities. The two males, Student B and Student C often talked to other male students in the class about the weekend or homework. When working with a partner, the students in this study opted to work with their friends who were students without disabilities. Often before class or group activities, the students with disabilities socialized with their classmates and were seen as an accepted member of the classroom. The female student was the least interactive among the students in this study; nonetheless, she was very outgoing and talked to many students in the classroom.

Perspectives of the students with disabilities

The students were asked questions regarding their general opinions about school and their teachers, about assignments, about things they need help with or would like to improve and about disabilities. All of the students agreed that they liked school because of their friends, but the Student A commented that it was “boring and wastes my time”, while Student C said. “I like it kind of, but I don’t like doing the work and I am usually tired in the morning”. When asked about their English class, Student B said “I like it but it’s not my favorite. I like the group activities we do ‘cause that’s when I get to talk to my friends. I wish Mrs. C—would call on me more though because I know a lot.” Student C said that he likes English because of the group projects and “it is fun sometimes”. The three students had mixed emotions about the special education teachers and the help they receive. The two male students said they liked the male special education teacher because he was helpful. Student C said, “I like him ‘cause he’s cool

and he helps read stuff to me, but sometimes when I go see him I don't feel like doing work and it can be a hassle". Student B said, "I like him a lot. He helps me figure out problems or homework assignments. He helps me with my handwriting 'cause it's real bad and he makes me type things." Student A disagreed with the two boys: "I don't need help", she said. "I just had surgery to help my hearing and now I'm fine. Before my surgery I needed the help, but now I don't need a resource teacher. School is fun until it's time to go to resource because I feel like I shouldn't be there." The female, Student A, when asked about disabilities came forth right away and told me she used to be disabled because she needed hearing aids and help with her speech. She told the researcher that she does not think of herself as disabled since her ear surgery, but sometimes she has problems with her speech. She also said that she "feels bad for the kids in school with disabilities and need wheelchairs. Sometimes since they are right down the hall they scream so loud that it hurts my ears." Student C said that he sees a few students with disabilities, "but they aren't in my classes. They don't really affect me and I just imagine they aren't there." The other male, Student B, said "I know they are down the hall but I don't really see them. I feel bad for them but they aren't my friends so I don't know who they are really." The two males did not acknowledge that they had a learning disability or any disability at all; they just mentioned that they needed some help with their skills sometimes. All of the students have long-term goals to continue school through college and were looking forward to the high school next year.

Discussion

With so many schools and classrooms that are increasingly becoming inclusive and are including students with disabilities into the general classroom, it is important to know and understand how those students with disabilities perceive the inclusive environment. This research is important and should be conducted, because it is important to know how inclusion benefits or

impedes the students who are labeled with a learning disability. It is also important to understand the perspectives of students with disabilities because they are the ones most affected by inclusive classrooms. Once we understand how they perceive inclusion, we can implement changes where they are needed for the students to succeed. As we move to more inclusive classroom and instruction, teachers will need teaching methods that cover a more cognitively diverse group, with different skill levels (Parker, 2002). Learning about their perceptions will help teachers and staff members create an authentic learning environment for every student; it will give insight to what adjustments, if any, need to be implemented so that the students with disabilities feel as if they belong in the classroom with their full-ability peers. As mentioned before, this topic of research stems from having student teaching experiences with inclusive classrooms and not knowing how the students with disabilities felt in the general English classroom. Overall, this research aimed at better understanding how students with learning disabilities perceived their general education core class, so that teachers can use this insight for their future inclusive classes to create a welcoming and authentic learning environment.

The research that was conducted gave insight to how three students perceived their education and their placement in a general education inclusive classroom. The qualitative data that was collected through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews produced results that revealed how the students felt about disabilities in general, as well as how they perceived their teacher and peers. One of the most significant findings was if the students perceived themselves as being disabled. The two male students in the study did not think of themselves as having a disability. They associated the term “students with disabilities” as those with physical. One of the male students even said he did not really care about students with disabilities, because he “didn’t even see them and they don’t matter to me really”. The

female student, Student A, acknowledged that she needed the assistance of the paraprofessionals sometimes; she said that she had a disability with her hearing and speech but improved since her ear surgery. The students commented on classroom participation and all had different perceptions. Student B said that he wished the English teacher called on him more, while the other two students said they either did not like talking or did not care about talking in class. When asked about the presence of the special education teacher and the paraprofessionals, all of the students said they liked the teachers and they “helped” them with homework assignments, projects, reading and other tasks. The students also remarked that they liked the class because their friends were in it, except the female student, who said that she liked the class but her “good friends” were not in the class. The observations gave substance to the interviews, where the three students were interacting with their peers continuously. The male students, during group activities often socialized with others. The teacher often used random selection for group discussions, so that all students had the opportunity to read or answer questions; students also had the privilege to not read aloud if they were asked.

This research was conducted in one English classroom of 21 students in a small rural community in New York State. A limitation of this research is that only one class was examined. The sample size cannot be generalized to the larger population; nonetheless, the results can be insightful for others when faced with an inclusive classroom environment. In addition, the total number of students with disabilities in the class where research was conducted consisted of five; however, only three parental/guardian permission slips were returned and those other two students were not able to participate in the research.

In accordance with previous research conducted regarding the perceptions of students with disabilities that was mentioned, one result was similar; however, differences are prominent

and important. One of the studies directly pertaining to students with disabilities, Cook-Sather (2003), found that students with disabilities generally liked having class with students without disabilities, because they were their friends and they helped them with assignments. Two of the subjects commented that they liked the classes because their friends were in it and they liked group activities because they were comfortable with their friends. Unfortunately, this was the only consistency between the previous research and the present study. In another study, Klingner (1999), students were surveyed and interviewed regarding grading and homework, with most commented that the homework and tests were often too hard and had difficult language. Perhaps the students in that study did not have the appropriate resources and assistance that they needed. The students in this study said that they did not mind the work for the class and that the special education teacher often helped them with tests and homework, either during class or during “resource” time. The students said that they liked the special education teacher because he made it easy for them to do well on tests and assignments and understand homework. The majority of the research found dealt with perceptions of students without disabilities about students with disabilities in the classroom.

I feel that we are not finding many studies regarding the perceptions of students with disabilities because it is a sensitive topic that many people do not know how to approach. Nonetheless, it is one of the most important issues to understand, since inclusion continues to grow in the education system. For this research study, two out of the three students with disabilities did not regard themselves as being disabled. This may be because of the definition that they associate with disability or being disabled. The term disability can hold extremely negative connotations to some people, and being labeled may be quite offensive. Nonetheless, it is important to break that barrier, because in order to receive help, the students need to be

labeled. This is something that can be worked on in the classroom by teachers of all grades and subjects, so that students can accept that they have disabilities and will not look down upon those with labels. It is disheartening to think that negative stereotypes associated with labels are still present. It is imperative to break this stereotype and barrier, so that all students have an equal opportunity to learn and reach their goals. By not addressing the issue, we are further impairing and oppressing the students.

The results of this study give insight to how students with disabilities perceived being a member in an inclusive, general education class. One of the most important issues that need focus is the idea of disability and the connotations associated with the term. Educators need to face this topic carefully, as we do not want to make any of the students uncomfortable, but acceptance needs to be addressed. As inclusive classrooms continue to increase in schools, it is possible this issue will not be as controversial in the future. In addition, the role of the teachers is extremely important in the inclusive classroom, because they can either make the experience positive or negative. General education teachers need to understand the importance of differentiated instruction, along with collaboration with other teachers and paraprofessionals. Since we have many different learners in the classroom, it is important to introduce many different opportunities for learning.

As for the procedures of the institution, the more assistance that is available to students in a school, the better the opportunity for success. The schools should provide more paraprofessionals and special education teachers for the students, to ensure that they are receiving all the possibilities for success. In addition, schools, along with colleges should provide teachers and potential teachers with extensive teacher preparation regarding students with disabilities. Too often, teachers do not feel adequate or prepared enough to aid the students with

disabilities, and unfortunately, the students are the ones that suffer the most. Since inclusive education is on the rise, the preparation needed for special education instruction should intensify and be a focal point because teachers, sooner or later, will most likely have a student with a learning disability in their classroom.

Figure 1: Subjects interviewed and observed

Student	Gender	Age/Grade Level	Race	Disability	IEP
A	Female	Age: 15; 8 th grade	Caucasian	Speech Impairments/ Hearing Impairments	Yes
B	Male	Age: 13; 8 th Grade	Caucasian	Motor skills, handwriting skills	Yes
C	Male	Age: 13; 8 th Grade	Caucasian	Reading skills	Yes

Appendix A

Key areas interviews were concerned with

- a) Relationships with other students
- b) Relationships with teachers
- c) Participation in class
- d) Experiences in other classes/ likes and dislikes, etc

*Each interview started with questions concerning the student's background. The questions then continued regarding their schooling experience.

Sample interview questions

- a) Do you like school? Why or why not?
- b) Do you feel that you do better in class with the help of Mr./ Mrs. (special education teacher) why or why not?
- c) Do you have friends outside of school? Are they in your classes?
- d) How do you define disability?
- e) What do you think about students with disabilities?

Appendix B

Types of information to be looked for via observation

- a) Student interaction with peers and teachers
- b) Participation in classroom activities from students with disabilities
- c) Classroom responsibilities of students with disabilities
- d) Peer acceptance and inclusion of students with disabilities
- e) Seating arrangements of students with disabilities

Appendix C

Category and sub-categories regarding interviews and observations

Main Categories	Sub-Categories For Each Main Category				
Participation	Group Activities	Class Discussions	Overall Involvement/Duties	Leadership	
Interactions with students	Students with Disabilities	Students without Disabilities			
Interactions with Instructional staff	General Education Teacher	Push-in Special Education Staff			
Student Perspectives of School (Interview)	Teachers and Instructional Staff	General Education Classes	Special Education Classes/Inclusion Classes	Likes/Dislikes of Education or Inclusion	Future Expectations/Goals
Relationships with others (Perspectives) (Interview)	Students with Disabilities	Students without Disabilities	Special Education	General Education Teachers	

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