

Running head: HOW DO I SUPPORT

# How do I Support the Goals of my Special Needs Students in an Inclusion Setting?



Noemi Menendez

EDUC 602 Inquiry in Practice

Date: July 31, 2007

## Introduction

How did I become a teacher? It all started in May 2002 when I lost my job after working for 22 years in the business world. Although I was shocked, there was a sense of relief that I had an opportunity to change my career. Fortunately, I received a lucrative 55 week severance package which managed the anxiety of maintaining my financial situation while I desperately searched to find my place in this world. My search ended with a series of coincidences which led me to a federally funded pioneer program, the New Jersey Consortium for Urban Education (NJCUE), which was recruiting Math, Science, and special education teachers in urban environments. After a selective screening process, I was accepted into the special education track of the NJCUE Program and assigned to an Abbott school district in New Jersey. After one year of teaching and learning in this accelerated program, I received my special education certificate and taught for 2 years in that district.

Although I received two months of training, 5 weeks of student teaching and ongoing college courses for the first year, where I learned the most was in my classroom. With no direction from the administration, I was thrown into the overcrowded trenches of a small portion of the school's inadequate library which was dubbed the resource room. My resource room experience in teaching math and language arts for grades 2-5 taught me volumes about the true meaning of teaching. The obstacles I encountered were difficult to anticipate, as they were unexpected and uncontrollable at times. Every obstacle became an opportunity to learn more about myself and those challenges deepened my teaching practice. The key for me was to be aware of my environment and focus on the positive aspects of those situations. Teaching in this district prepared me for my teaching career, but intuitively I sensed that I still had much more to learn.

Today, I am responsible for providing replacement and inclusion language arts and math to grades 3-5 in an elementary school in a suburban town in New Jersey. The Diversity District consists of three primary schools (K-2), three intermediate schools (3-5), one multiage magnet school (K-5), one middle school (6-8), and one high school, and has a diverse population consisting of a wide socioeconomic range. As outlined in the Inspiration School Opening Day Packet, the demographics of my school are 66% white, 14% and 20% black and simulate the real world which offer students the opportunity to live and learn in that environment. My principal is a teacher's advocate who fosters a climate that inspires teamwork and the staff works together for the benefit of our students. This is my fourth year as a special education teacher and my primary experience is in the resource room environment. When I began working in this district last year, my assignment was a combination of resource room replacement as well as inclusion. Although my prior corporate experience was in relationship management and customer service, and I possessed over 20 years of interpersonal skills, I found inclusion to be both challenging and rewarding. I also learned that every assignment is unique and that there are many variables necessary to ensure that students' goals are met. This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> year I have taught in an inclusion setting, and my inexperience and lack of training in this setting lead me to pose my question **"How do I support the goals of my special needs students in an inclusion setting?"** Based on exploring my question, I hope to find strategies and best practices which will empower me to improve my own teaching practice.

## Question

How do I support the goals of my special needs students in an inclusion setting?

Teaching for the special education department is frustrating at times but filled with challenges and opportunities to expand one's teaching practice. These opportunities and variety of teaching situations keep me engaged, and inspire my creativity and quest for professional development. It is the most rewarding job I have ever had.

As I began the 2006-2007 school year, I anxiously opened the Inspiration School Opening Day Packet to discover my teaching assignment for the new year. My schedule consisted of resource room classes for 3rd and 4th grade Language Arts and Math and 5th grade Language Arts and Math inclusion classes. I was thrilled with the variety of my schedule and felt confident and quite optimistic about the year ahead.

Although I was armed with confidence, I must admit that I felt some apprehension towards the inclusion setting. Due to my lack of experience, there was a degree of ambiguity about this concept. To my relief, my 5th grade Math inclusion partner was Ms. S who taught inclusion 5th grade Language Arts with me the prior school year. When we met, we had a positive connection. Since inclusion was new to both of us, and we had no preconceived notions about this program, we developed an efficient, productive and stimulating relationship. We collaborated, planned and co-taught together. Due to our personality styles, our relationship developed into a partnership based on mutual respect, understanding, and support.

Since my prior experience last year was my frame of reference, I took for granted that it would be the standard for my next inclusion experience. However, this year's assignment with my new inclusion partner proved to be a challenging one. She had 8 years of teaching experience which included some special education experience. Although we did not work together during

the prior school year, we formed a collegial relationship and I perceived her to be a collaborative and flexible teacher. We were assigned to teach 5th grade Language Arts Inclusion together. The class consisted of a total of 17 students which included 6 students with Individualized Educational Programs. The demographic make up of the class, as described by the Inspiration School Opening Day Packet, was 65% white, 12% black and 24% Hispanic. I embraced this opportunity with open arms, but from the very beginning I sensed what appeared to be reluctance on my inclusion partner's part to welcome me into her classroom. On my first day in her class, she forgot to introduce me to the students which made me feel uncomfortable. Were my feelings coming from my own fears and lack of training? I felt confused about my role, and realized that it would take time to understand the many variables that were necessary to make inclusion successful. While every relationship is not destined to be successful, it must be productive in an inclusion setting. During this time, I had just started my graduate course, *Exploration into Inquiry*, and I decided to research what I could do to lessen my fears and deepen my own inclusion teaching practice.

What is inclusion? I referred to my distriCt's website (2007), and found that the district site does not define inclusion but states the following, "Students are usually in general education classes for significant portions of the day, depending upon their needs. They may go to the resource center for specific types of assistance, or the resource center teacher may go into the regular education class to provide instruction." The general definition is simply to bring support services to a student in the general education setting, in lieu of pulling out the student into a resource room setting. According to the WEAC website (2007), support services are delivered by a special education teacher, working in the classroom with the general education teacher, to meet

the student's Individual Education Program goals. The special education teacher prepares and implements modifications to the general education curriculum as appropriate.

When I started this research paper, I thought it was about working with a reluctant new partner. But as I went through this journey, I found that it was about forming a true partnership with a common goal. I had to adjust my techniques and work through the obstacles and not to fault someone else. Everyone comes with their own set of circumstances, beliefs, and personality which encompass our professional as well as our personal lives. It is that foundation and background that becomes an integral part of our unique makeup. This was not apparent to me last October, and it took me a year to come to terms with it. This paper chronicles the twist and turns my path took, and the many surprises along the way.

## **Literature Review**

As I began reviewing the literature to answer my question, I reflected on a number of different sources that might supply me with a direction to pursue. Since inclusion was relatively new to me, I decided to focus on researching the following topics as they relate to the inclusion setting:

- Inclusion – supporting special needs students in the general education classroom.
- Collaboration – sharing and exchanging ideas with others.
- Relationships – making connections with others.
- Teamwork-working together for a common goal.
- Differentiation – creating an instructional lesson that meets the needs of varying levels and learning styles.

### **Inclusion**

"It takes a village to raise a child" believed to be an old African proverb sums up the many components necessary to making inclusive education work. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975 is the federal law which defines that children with learning disabilities should be placed in the least restrictive environment. Initially, implementation of the law placed children with mild disabilities into the general education classroom (Villa & Thousand, 2003). As of the 1990's, a program known as inclusion placed children with disabilities into the general education classroom and supported these students with anything they required to learn in that environment. As stated in Villa and Thousand's (2003) article:

Despite the continued evolution toward inclusive education, however, tremendous disparities exist among schools, districts, and states. For

example, the U.S. Department of Education (2003) found that the percentage of students with disabilities from 6-21 who were taught for 80% or more of the school day in general education classrooms ranged from a low of 18% in Hawaii to a high of 82% in Vermont. (p. 20)

This implies an inconsistency in the way inclusion is implemented in each school district as inclusion has many perspectives, and the interpretation is in the eyes of the beholder.

Villa and Thousand (2003) recommend the following:

Successful promotion and implementation of inclusive education require the five following systems-level practices: connection with organizational best practices; visionary leadership and administrative support; redefined roles and relationships among adults and students; collaboration; and additional adult support when needed. (p. 20)

### **Collaboration**

Wilford (2006) brings about an important point of view. Collaboration is cooperation with the idea of building knowledge through conversation. The art of conversing with our colleagues provides an opportunity for us to share experiences and best practices. We are also given the gift of looking at education through a different lens, and our colleagues are valuable resources who bring a wealth of knowledge to our schools. I understand that collaboration is a crucial component of our educational system; however, administrators must provide a framework for teachers to collaborate on an ongoing basis.

After visiting the Cornerstone Learning Community in Tallahassee, Florida, Wilford (2006) observed a model that the school had developed which encourages collaboration. The model has teachers leading collaboration efforts through coordinator led discussions. The key to



this model is communication that involves teachers, administration, parents, and children which fosters building a school community. Wilford (2006) reports that their collaboration model consists of the following key elements:

- Conversation: exchange of thoughts and ideas through discussion.
- Confrontation: expressing different viewpoints.
- Communication: making connections through understanding.
- Cooperation: willing to work with others.
- Collaboration: building of shared knowledge.
- Community: an environment based on mutual understanding through collaboration. (p.15)

I think that Cornerstone has a firm hold on the true meaning of collaboration. My school has some of the components of Cornerstone's model. Our administrator works hard to engage students, parents, and teachers to create a sense of community. Although grade level meetings and staff meetings are the formal methods of communication, these meetings typically have a structured agenda with little or no room for teachers to exchange ideas. Preparation periods, lunch, and quick discussions at the copy machine, are also informal avenues for discussing new ideas. On the other hand, some of the challenges include lack of common preparation time, teachers who are not approachable, and/or reluctant to collaborate.

Why are teachers reluctant to collaborate? What are they afraid of? Have they ever been taught how to collaborate? Gut, Oswald, Leal, Frederiksen, and Gustafson (2003) constructed a study designed to meet the needs of student teachers to facilitate their development of collaboration and consultative skills through partnering with a school during the teacher's field experience. They found:

Collaborative preparation for both special and general education preservice teachers allows for the development of collaborative partnerships and an opportunity to resolve role ambiguity so that once in the field, teachers' effectiveness will not be hindered by role confusion. (p. 112)

In addition, they refer to earlier studies (O'Shea, Lee & Sattler, 1999) which cite that, "Preservice teachers felt they were better prepared to plan instruction, use various teaching strategies and modify materials. They also felt more prepared to actively participate in shared decision making with other professionals." (p. 114)

Reading this study gave me hope that college programs are finally catching up with the significant changes that have occurred in education since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975 was put into effect. If so, the new crop of teachers will have the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to succeed in the new world of education.

In my opinion, I believe there is a gap in special education training for some tenured educators who have over thirty years in the educational setting. Many were only taught to teach in isolation. How do they receive the necessary training to shift their perspective when the amount of training available is limited or nonexistent?

While the educational arena primarily encourages collaboration to increase efficiency and productivity, Johnson's (2003) study uncovers additional benefits for teachers to work more collaboratively. He cites:

However, teachers in this study reported important emotional and psychological benefits associated with working closely with colleagues in teams. For example, nearly 90% of teachers

revealed that they gave and received 'moral support' in teams to 'some extent' or a 'great extent' when confronted by the 'highs and lows' of classroom teaching. (p. 343)

In addition, the teachers participating in the survey reported that having the opportunity to exchange ideas, plan together, and share their feelings openly enhanced their working relationships and enabled them to reduce teaching in isolation. (p. 343)

Johnson (2003) reports:

An unexpectedly high proportion of teachers -over 80% -- reported feeling to 'some extent' or a 'great extent' part of a 'learning community' which shared responsibility for ongoing teacher professional development. Furthermore, around the same proportion of teachers indicated that they learnt more from their colleagues when teaming than previously. "It has been a great experience working collaboratively with another teacher. I have learnt a lot from her with regard to collaborative teaching and learning." (p. 344)

Johnson (2003) also says that "Around 60% of teachers reported that 'sharing jobs' with team members reduced their workload to 'some' or 'great extent' ". However, a considerable number of teachers feel that working collaboratively increases the number of responsibilities placed upon them without receiving any compensation. (p. 346)

Valerie Chrisman's (2005) survey researches to identify common factors present in successful schools. She finds there are three consistent components which the four schools

studied and attribute to their success. Teacher Leadership was evident in schools where teachers made decisions about teaching and learning. They used collaborative time to review student work, used assessments to implement differentiated instruction and created a framework to support other teachers through different teaching methods such as team teaching and reciprocal teaching. In addition they shared lesson plans, focused on student achievement and spent between 1-4 hours weekly in collaborative lesson planning. (p. 18)

This literature gives me an overall picture of the many different variables surrounding inclusion. It is complicated and there is so much room for improvement, but my focus is meeting student goals as an inclusion teacher. One of my goals is to do everything possible to support the children I teach by removing the roadblocks to success. I can begin by developing collaborative working relationships with my general education colleagues.

### **Relationships**

"What does a mutual relationship mean?" asks Jordan (1986, p. 2). Dictionary.com (2007) defines mutuality as "a reciprocal relation between interdependent entities (objects or individuals or groups)", however, Jordan (1986) states that:

Mutual empathy occurs when two people relate to one another in a context of interest in the other, emotional availability and responsiveness, cognitive appreciation of the wholeness of the other; the intent is to understand. While some mutual empathy involves an acknowledgment of sameness in the other, an appreciation of the differentness of the other's experience is also vital. The movement toward the other's differentness is actually central to growth in relationships and also can provide a powerful

sense of validation for both self and other. Growth occurs because as I stretch to match or understand your experience, something new is acknowledged or grows in me. (p. 5)

As I interpret Jordan's thoughts, relationships can create growth by accepting each other's sameness as well as their differences. If this is true, then even the most difficult relationship can teach us lessons. This is very comforting to me because as teachers, we come into contact with colleagues who have diverse styles and personalities. Therefore, each person provides us with an opportunity to grow in unique ways.

In an effort to cultivate diverse relationships so they continue to grow, Jordan (1992) suggests "looking at relational resilience from the relational dynamic as opposed to the separate self individual model." (p. 1) She cites the following:

The perspective put forth here suggests instead that resilience be seen as a relational dynamic. In particular, the concepts of supported vulnerability, mutual empathic involvement, relational confidence and relational awareness are explored. Transformation through relationship also suggests not just a return to a previously existing state, but movement through and beyond stress or suffering into a new and more comprehensive personal and relational integration. (p. 1)

According to the author, we can benefit from taking a risk at the appropriate time and making ourselves vulnerable. Jordan (1992) continues to say:

Open sharing of our need for support or acceptance may be an essential factor in developing a sense of close connection. Therefore, part of what

we are trying to transform is the illusory sense of self-sufficiency and the tendency to deny vulnerability. We need a model that encourages supported vulnerability. (p.4)

She suggests that empowerment by encouraging mutual growth and constructive conflict as well as giving and receiving support is crucial to give a sense of mutual involvement. Jordan (1992) further elaborates that "A personal sense of worth or confidence ideally is not just feeling good about oneself but also involves a sense that one has something to contribute to others and that one is part of a meaningful relationship." (p.5)

### **Teamwork**

Fleming & Monda-Amaya's study (2001) eloquently articulates the importance of applying learning techniques in education. They discuss the changes in the educational setting which have shifted :from teachers who have taught in isolation to the necessity for collaboration with colleagues in order to meet students' differentiated goals. As a result of these changes, a teamwork model is now being incorporated in the academic setting where teams of teachers are being established.

Glenn (2005) defines a team as a small number of people who come together for a common goal. Glenn says, "It takes time to get to know one another and how team members' skills will complement each other." Although the team members are combining their joint efforts towards a common goal, team members' personalities need to be considered when appointing team members. (p. 6)

Glenn says that it may be worthwhile to have team members take a personality assessment like Myers-Briggs. If the team will be together for a long time, it might also be worthwhile to invest

in professional development in team work as well. In order to ensure that teams succeed, there needs to be open and honest communication, trust, and team members must be mutually accountable for the team's outcomes and responsibilities. (p. 7)

## **Differentiation**

Carol Ann Tomlinson (2003) writes about her colleague who taught students with IQ's above 140. Although she was a successful teacher in that environment in the eyes of her students, their parent's as well as her own, she made the choice to return to the general education environment and apply a higher level curriculum to a diverse population (p. 7). Tomlinson (2003) says, "We could say that this teacher decided to "differentiate instruction in a mixed-ability classroom"-that she decided to "teach them all" in a heterogeneous setting" (p. 8).

Tomlinson (2003) reports that as this teacher traveled through her journey, she asked herself many questions. Her colleague accepted responsibility for the success of each individual student. She looked at each child's strengths, interests, and needs and tapped into the key that would motivate them. Her commitment made a profound difference in her classroom. (pp. 8-9)

Tomlinson (2003, p. 10) asks, "Should specialists focus their energies on students or teachers?" She continues to elaborate the following:

One specialist can touch hundreds of lives through successful collaboration with a single teacher, whereas other specialists are wasting their time attempting collaboration. What circumstances maximize the student's full possibilities? What can we do to support educators in developing the skill and the will to teach for learner's

equity of access to excellence? (p. 11)

Tomlinson's words ring true for me, and confirm that there are more questions than answers. There is no one answer, for each situation is unique. In conclusion, I found that the sources I reviewed have given me both a strategic and a focused perspective in regard to my question. There are a myriad of roads I could travel to inform my research, but the themes that come through for me are collaboration, and improving and developing my relationships with my teaching colleagues to help me reach my goals.



## Methodology

In order to attempt to answer my question, "**How do I support the goals of my special needs students in an inclusion setting?**" I used a variety of data sources. I used journaling, personality types, teacher surveys, observations, and literature sources. Initially, I used the following codes as I sifted through all my data:

- classroom management
- collaboration
- communication
- conflict
- differentiation
- flexibility
- teamwork

Since the themes overlapped and I became very confused, I decided to refine the list of codes to the following with the subheadings in parentheses included within those codes:

- conflict (classroom management)
- communication
- cooperation (flexibility)
- collaboration (teamwork)

The codes above are listed in order of frequency and occurrence in my situation.

The first data source used was journaling. When I began the *Exploration into Inquiry* course in October of 2006, I was introduced to teacher research and reflection through journaling. As this was a requirement of that class, I kept a journal from October 2006 through April 2007. Journaling through teacher reflection on my practice led me to my question "**How do I support the goals of my special needs students in an inclusion setting?**" very early in the process. As a result, my first source of data collection was 7 months of journaling on a daily/weekly basis.

My second data source is the analysis of personality styles for both my inclusion partner and myself. RTC's *Styles of Teaching* course introduced me to different teaching and learning styles through personality analysis.

The third data source was an online survey completed by 24 special education and general education from a sampling of numerous school districts. Email addresses were compiled from conversations with teachers attending RTC courses throughout the Fall 06 and Spring 07 semesters. The survey (appendix) consisted of 7 questions one of which one was an open ended question. The following are the survey demographics:

- 24 teachers responded to the survey
- 54% special education teachers
- 46% general education teachers
- 58% with 1-10 years of teaching experience
- 25% with 11+years of teaching experience.
- 67% taught in a k-5 setting
- 21% taught in a 6-8 setting.
- 96% taught in an inclusion setting
- 67% of the responded to the open-ended question

My fourth data source was a collection of 10 literature sources on the following topics:

- Inclusion – supporting special needs students in the general education classroom.
- Collaboration-sharing and exchanging ideas with others.
- Relationships making connections with others.
- Teamwork-working together for a common goal.

- Differentiation – creating an instructional lesson that meets the needs of varying levels and learning styles.

As my fifth source of data, I used my Special Education Director's observation reports of my March 28, 2007 inclusion class this year.

As I examined these five sources of data which consisted of different perspectives, I became more aware of my own inclusion practice and I found some of answers to my question **"How do I support the goals of my special needs students in an inclusion setting?"**

## Data Analysis & Findings

### Conflict

As defined by Dictionary.com, conflict is "a state of disharmony between incompatible or antithetical persons, ideas, or interests; a clash". Conflict was a consistent thread throughout my data sources, and the most frequent and significant challenge evident as it relates to my own personal experience, and the literature I reviewed prior to executing my online teacher survey. Johnson (2003) reports that a considerable number of teachers feel that working collaboratively increases the number of responsibilities placed upon them without receiving any compensation.

My online teacher reported the following sources of conflict,

Feelings <b>About Inclusion</b>	Response %
I feel confused about my role	36%
I feel like a guest teacher or teacher's aide	32%
I feel challenged	23%
My workload is increased by sharing jobs	23%

One teacher surveyed commented, "the inclusion setting doesn't benefit either the special education students nor the regular students. Teaching tends to be toward the middle, with no one getting what they truly need for their learning styles".

My journal entry of October 13, 2006 documents my initial feelings of frustration,

This week has been exhausting. Inclusion is time consuming and feels like pulling teeth at times. The more I think about this situation with my inclusion partner, the more aggravated I get. I do not have the opportunity to work on my students' objectives while I am in the classroom.

In addition, my inclusion partner voiced her frustration in my journal entry of November 15, 2006, when she said to me "I hate to say it but I would rather have these kids pulled out to the Resource Room instead of having them in the classroom because they bring down the other kids."

On December 3, 2006, my inclusion partner and I were discussing the results of a recent writing project which led to a discussion on inclusion. Her first teaching experience was in special education inclusion and it was not a positive one. The following journal entry documents our discussion,

She said the inclusion partner she worked with used to get annoyed when she did a review with the kids. I explained to her that I was working on an inclusion inquiry for my Master's Degree as it was such a gray area which varied from classroom to classroom. She agreed. I told her I wanted her to feel comfortable in asking my help or support with the kids. I explained I loved to hear her read-alouds but I wanted to contribute to the class while I was there.

The above entry shows my willingness to make a connection through my vulnerability and letting it be known that I am not the expert in the inclusion process and that I have much to learn. According to Jordan (1992), we can benefit from taking a risk at the appropriate time and make ourselves vulnerable. She says, "Open sharing of our need for support or acceptance may be an essential factor in developing a sense of close connection." (p. 4)

As I observed on February 16, 2007, my inclusion partner is more concerned with challenging the students who have high ability and less emphasis on the lower ability students.

Her expectations are high and she has little tolerance for those kids who cannot meet them. My journal entry elaborates the details of this observation,

My inclusion partner came up with some persuasive writing samples.

The samples were very high level (6th grade). The assignment was a

5 paragraph persuasive essay. Two of my special needs students

were overwhelmed and felt the assignment was out of their

reach. One student was so distraught that he began to cry, while the

other student simply could not produce the required five paragraphs.

This student's mother voiced her concerns at a meeting with the

learning disabilities teaching consultant. The learning consultant told

her, "Your daughter should not be responsible for a 5 paragraph

essay." Modifications would have avoided this episode altogether.

It was then agreed that my inclusion partner would accept a

minimum of three paragraphs as appropriate.

Behavior issues came up very early in the school year. Since we had not worked together before, I had no idea how she would handle classroom management. I observed that my inclusion partner had less tolerance, and more scrutiny, in regards to the special needs students. My journal entry of February 26,2007 describes my observation,

My inclusion partner called on my student, Sue, to respond to a

read-aloud question and to my surprise she answered. She spoke so

low that I didn't hear what she said but I heard my inclusion

partner say to her in a disapproving tone "Sue, do you really think

that's the answer? You need to think out of the box". I was so

embarrassed for the student. The lesson moved on and other students were called upon as my inclusion partner inclusion partner continued to read and then she called on Sue again. This time there was no response, and my inclusion partner continued to prompt her into answering the question. She would not let up on Sue and it became a standoff. An extremely long awkward pause followed while everyone waited for her answer. Finally, my inclusion partner looked to me to break the silence.

We never talked about how we would resolve conflict and classroom management issues. I was very conscious of the classroom management used to address special needs students in the classroom. Was I being overly sensitive about this, or was there a different treatment for special needs students? On March 25, 2007, the class had just completed their writing responses to a picture and the same confident kids volunteered to read their stories, the following journal entry describes what my student experienced,

My inclusion partner told the class that she would like to hear from those students who rarely participated in reading their stories. Just then, the kids cajoled Nancy to read, and I was nervous about this idea because she has difficulty focusing on her writing and tends to ramble on. The students convinced her to read, and gave her their feedback after she had finished. Although they were kind with their comments, Nancy was very upset.

## Communication

As defined by Dictionary.com, communication is "the exchange of thoughts, messages, or information, as by speech, signals, writing, or behavior." One teacher from the online survey attributed her inclusion success to "on-going communication" yet only 30% of the respondents reported that they "share common planning periods" with their inclusion partners.

I did not have a common planning period with my inclusion partner so our communication, or lack thereof, was yet another hurdle to conquer. I requested that she give me her lesson plans for the class in advance, so I could prepare the necessary modifications. Since I received her written lesson plans very rarely, I had to request an update each morning to be prepared for the day's class. Whenever she initiated communication, it was typically a last minute notice, which gave me little time to prepare. In fact, my inclusion partner seemed to be more comfortable communicating with other colleagues, rather than speaking directly to me as evidenced in my November 15, 2006 journal entry,

One of my special education colleagues popped in today and told me she ran into my inclusion partner in the lunchroom. My colleague asked my inclusion partner how everything was going and my inclusion partner expressed her frustration at having such low kids. My colleague told her she should use me to differentiate instruction to help meet all her goals. My inclusion partner hesitated saying this was hard for her.

Two weeks later my colleague told me about the following conversation which occurred as documented in my December 3, 2006 journal entry,



..

..

..

..

My inclusion partner told my colleague that she would make some changes and give up some control and she has started to include me in the planning. After I spoke with the school psychologist about these issues, she informed me that the principal had spoken to my inclusion partner regarding her need to work more collaboratively with me to ensure that modifications are made.

As the year progressed, our communication channels began to open and my inclusion partner asked me to grade the whole class' writing assignments. Although I knew this was not my role, I agreed to grade the papers in the interest of developing the relationship as documented in my journal entry dated February 26, 2007,

I graded all the papers and I added a "friendly note" telling her that the papers were graded and they looked pretty good overall. I asked if she could change the read-aloud to the end of the day and also told her that I would like to grade my kids' Reading and Language Art's work so I could personally get a handle on their progress.

I observed that our communication began to take on a more positive note as documented in my March 26, 2007 journal entry,

My inclusion partner told me about a change in the schedule that would affect our pre-writing lesson for tomorrow. This lesson was important because it was a,

prerequisite to my observation lesson taking place in our class on Wednesday.

Later that same day, I attended a special education meeting. There was much discussion about the perceived value of teacher's aides and inclusion teachers in the classroom. The superintendent feels that the inclusion teachers are not using their certifications, and our supervisor wanted to make us aware about his perception. This is definitely a hot button in my district. I voiced my opinion about having support from different areas to make inclusion successful and how that should filter down from the top. I asked my supervisor, "What happens when you have a resistant inclusion partner?" She said, "Discuss it with the principal, because we don't want to pair you up with someone that is not open to inclusion." Other teachers chimed in about the issues and how teachers have to be spoken to by administration to ensure their buy in and commitment to inclusion. There is definitely room for improvement!

When I surveyed teachers online, I asked them what their district's position/policy on inclusion was. Here are the results:

District's Policy/Position on Inclusion	Response %
Encourages collaboration among teachers	94%
Provides additional support when needed	50%
Provides administrative support	44%
Shares best practices	38%
Provides visionary leadership	25%
Redefmes roles and relationships among teachers	19%

### Cooperation

As defined by Dictionary.com, cooperation is "an act or instance of working or acting together for a common purpose or benefit; joint action." As I looked at my journal entries as far

• ■

• ■

• ■

• ■

•

back as October, I searched for my efforts at cooperating with my inclusion partner to form a productive relationship. I found that I had given her information I found on inclusion, asked for lesson plans, and I was flexible with changing class time as well as adjusting my role to meet students' needs. In addition, I gave her suggestions and communicated modifications which would help meet instructional goals such as graphic organizers, audio books, and slowing down the pace. I took the initiative in lesson planning and researched tools and methods for implementation. I shared multiple intelligence strategies of using storyboards to develop summarizing skills, and I took the lead in addressing behavior issues for my students which arose during our shared class period.

As I read through the data, I found that my inclusion partner's efforts towards cooperation did not surface until December 2006. At this time, she began implementing my suggestions (using graphic organizers, limiting read-aloud to 20 minutes). She asked me to read aloud, expressed concerns about summarizing skills and asked for help, and allowed me to try a storyboard strategy. She told me she would make an effort to be more flexible as she felt she was too rigid at times. Since then, she followed my modifications, gave me early warning regarding upcoming changes or events, and discussed future lessons. In fact, when I told her that the special education supervisor would be observing me during our class period, she gave me full reign to take the lead in developing the inclusion lesson, and was very supportive during that whole observation process. As evident in my journal entry of March 25, 2007,

She was looking out for me and that shows me a definite commitment on her part. So what has happened? There seems to be a give and take that wasn't there before. Is it because we are

.. ■

.. ■

.. ■

.. ■

getting more comfortable with each other or is it  
influence/pressure from administrators and parents?

Here are results from the online survey reporting teachers' description of  
their inclusion partnership.

<b>Description of General Education/ Special Education Partner</b>	<b>Response Of</b>
Share problem solving and classroom management	65%
Share goals, decisions, classroom instruction	74%
Share responsibility for students' assessments	70%
Shared instruction	61%

### **Collaboration**

As defined by Dictionary.com, collaboration is "working together especially in a joint intellectual effort". Wilford (2006) brings about an important point of view. Collaboration is cooperation with the idea of building knowledge through conversation. The art of conversing with our colleagues provides an opportunity for us to share experiences and best practices. I asked my online respondents to share their feelings about inclusion. This is how they responded,

<b>Feelings About Inclusion</b>	<b>Response %</b>
I learn from my colleagues	77%
I feel I contribute to the class	64%
My workload is decreased by sharing jobs	46%
Collaborate and plan together on an ongoing basis	61%

One teacher says that in her experience the key to success is "respect for each others discipline or area of specialty". She elaborates further,

At times, it is easy to feel like a teacher's aide but you can't get hung up on those times because it is a time to observe and take skills from your teacher that you may incorporate at another time. In certain circumstances, I take over the class and teach my own lesson-sharing ideas with the teacher can be helpful in making the lesson more effective. Other times it doesn't need to be "in sync". It really depends on whether you are compatible with the teacher.

Another teacher reports her frustrations,

I love my inclusion teacher, but feel that my district just treats the position as an aide as they do not give us any time to plan and collaborate together. I wish we could all work together so we could be more effective and proactive!

Collaboration was a delicate dance for me and my inclusion partner. **It** came in bits and pieces, and only after conflict resolution, communication, and cooperation were in place did we have a true partnership. My first observation of collaboration is listed in my journal entry of December 3, 2006,

Interestingly enough, she asked me if we could work together as a team introducing the writer's workshop. I was very happy to see that she was going out of her comfort zone and reaching out to me. So we met and mapped out where we were going. I can't tell you how much that meant to me. Where I was once getting to the point



that I didn't care anymore, I felt re-energized and enthusiastic about being more involved.

Glenn (2005, p. 6) says, "It takes time to get to know one another and how team members' skills will complement each other." Glenn also suggests that personality assessments be completed by each member prior to assigning team roles. Prior to reading Glenn's report on teamwork, I took RTC's *Styles of Teaching* course in December. Since I had to build a relationship very quickly, I analyzed both our personalities and gained some insight to our personality types in an effort to unlock the key to our future success. My inclusion partner needed order and structure and possessed a parental style of managing. My style was more nurturing and concerned with seeking balance and having empathy for those less fortunate. It became very apparent to me that she needed to be validated on her terms, and that I might be able to connect with her by better understanding her personality traits.

After assessing both our personality styles, I shared them with her. I pointed out our similarities and differences and I complimented my inclusion partner on her strengths. In turn, she complimented me on my patience and natural connection with the students. In response to that I said, "We balance each other out". Our open exchange and acceptance of each other's differences is confirmed with Jordan's (1986) following citation,

Mutual empathy occurs when two people relate to one another in a context of interest in the other, emotional availability and responsiveness, cognitive appreciation of the wholeness of the other; the intent is to understand. While some mutual empathy involves an acknowledgment of sameness in the

..

..

..

..

other, an appreciation of the differentness of the other's experience is also vital. (p. 5)

To my surprise, I received an enormous gourmet gift basket from my inclusion partner at Christmas with a beautiful card thanking me for all my hard work during that year. When I received this card, I was convinced that we were well on our way to forming a successful partnership. Collaboration followed one step at a time. Although early on it seemed it was one step forward and two steps back. When I told my inclusion partner that my observation would take place during our shared class period, I felt the gates to collaboration open wide. The following is my journal reflection regarding my March 28, 2007 observation,

My inclusion observation went so well today. The lesson just flowed and the kids did a fabulous job. The lesson I prepared was an autobiographical poem which would be unique to each student. Although I wrote the lesson, I made sure that I collaborated with my inclusion partner on the activities to solicit her feedback. At the introduction of our lesson, I reviewed our previous discussion about the poem, reminded the students of the poem structure, and then my inclusion partner and I read our poems. As we read our poems, we asked each other questions to model the post conference we wanted students to use after they completed their poems. This activity accomplished many things. The students saw how we used our prewriting to write our poems. They learned personal information about us and observed our questioning

techniques. The bonus was that my inclusion partner and I got to know each other. The lesson continued with the students writing their own poems. The students were engaged and on task. Some students expressed distress prior to writing their poem because they thought it might be difficult. To their own surprise, they wrote beautiful poems that reflected their own sense of individuality. There was synchronicity in the classroom with each activity flowing into the next. There was freedom of movement and creativity. I felt very proud of the lesson I had developed, but it was more than that. My inclusion partner and I were working together as a team and that brought me a sense of accomplishment

The special education supervisor who observed my March 28, 2007 Language Arts Lesson cites her commendations in my observation documentation (appendix),

Advanced planning was evident in the implementation of this lesson. Both teachers had constructed personal poems, which they shared with students. Both teachers modeled respect for creative writing endeavors and personal disclosures. This established a warm and accepting environment for student risk taking as they wrote their own, personal poems. Lesson design engaged all students in the learning process. Lessons were differentiated through the use of graphic organizers, extended time, questioning techniques, and writing extenders (post-conference exit ticket asking students what they learned).

After this lesson, I felt I had come full circle as all my hard work had finally paid off. I felt I had contributed to enable all students to be successful. Perhaps Jordan (1992) says it best when she suggests that empowerment by encouraging mutual growth and constructive conflict as well as giving and receiving support is crucial to give a sense of mutual involvement. She further elaborates that, "A personal sense of worth or confidence ideally is not just feeling good about oneself but also involves a sense that one has something to contribute to others and that one is part of a meaningful relationship" (p. 5).

### **Success**

As defined by Dictionary.com, success is "the achievement of something desired, planned, or attempted." How do inclusion partners define success? 70% of respondents to the online survey reported that they felt the inclusion program provided an effective instructional setting and reported the key variables which attributed to their successful inclusion relationship. One teacher reports that sharing their authority is responsible for her partnership's success, as she elaborates,

My inclusion teacher and I get along very well and have become friends through the past 3 years. We treat the classroom as co-teachers and my students know that we are both "teachers". Not I am the regular teacher and she/he is the special education teacher, but rather both on an even playing field. We share responsibility and the teaching responsibilities. Not all Inclusions on my school work this well, however ours is a very good working relationship. Communication and honesty are the keys.

Another teacher reports that the key to a successful partnership is "respect, communication and a dedication to differentiated instruction in the classroom.

The most important variable is the attitude of the teachers and their ability to work together as equal teachers in the classroom." While one teacher cites, "We have the same goals for all of our students and work together in order to create lessons that will benefit all students" and yet another teacher credits, "Mutual respect sharing responsibilities collaboration concerning lesson plans alignment with core curriculum standards."

## Implications

After all the data collected and months of analysis, I find that I am at the end of my teacher research inquiry question. Although I do not have all the answers or the perfect formula for supporting my special needs students' goals in the inclusion setting, I can take responsibility for what I can contribute. As with any relationship, the human variable has many aspects and it is impossible to control my colleague's work style. I must accept that every inclusion partnership may not be equal, successful or my ideal partnership. However, when I focus my efforts on student goals, I can tackle the obstacles encountered one by one.

Relationships take time to develop and require commitment to meet common goals. This is a mutual process and both teachers should have input into classroom instruction. Ground rules regarding resolving conflict, planning, collaboration, and teaching strategies need to be discussed at the beginning of the school year. I've learned that I can open up the channels of communication and set the tone for the inclusion relationship. Additionally, I must communicate my needs to provide support and contribute to the inclusion classroom. Teacher roles may shift and should be flexible to adjust to students' needs. It is also imperative that both general education and special education teachers model respect for one another and project their roles as equal in authority to students, parents and administrators.

One of the key elements in developing an inclusion partnership depends upon the personalities and compatibility of the teachers involved. The teaching relationship can make or break the partnership but should not get in the way of meeting student needs. If something in the inclusion partnership is not working, the burden of effort is in my hands as I am the special needs child's advocate. While I can't force someone to follow my suggestions, I can certainly follow protocol and escalate the situation if another teacher is not cooperating. I must be proactive and

.

.

.

.

.



communicate that the Individual Education Program is a legal document and must be followed by both teachers.

Inclusion requires a supportive network of people consisting of administrators, parents, general education teachers, special education teachers, the special education department and the child study team. The framework is set by the superintendent and trickles down to the principals; the perception and implementation is monitored by the special education department and the child study team. This total process is open to interpretation and clouded with a range of gray areas. Teachers are paired up and assigned by the administration to work together with little or no notice to prepare. In most cases, teachers are not asked for input regarding their assignments. Roles are usually not defined and training is not always offered. In addition, there is no transition period to develop and merge their teaching styles. When teachers are not receptive to work together or simply don't like the inclusion program, the human variable gets in the way. In a perfect world this pair may want to work together and have some experience with inclusion but that still doesn't equal success. To truly be successful in inclusion, many of the pieces of the puzzle need to be in place.

I've learned that I cannot do it alone and that the District must provide vision and leadership in order to have teachers buy into the process. Inclusion partners should have common planning periods. Professional development is needed for both general education and special education teachers to define roles and responsibilities. Administrators and the child study team should work together to ensure that assigned inclusion partners have teaching styles and personalities that are compatible. They must also be motivated and willing to work in this setting.

When I started this paper last year, I felt very strongly that all general education teachers should participate in the inclusion program. However, after completing my project inquiry research, I now feel that inclusion is not for everyone. General education teachers should have a choice about working in an inclusion setting because if you don't have their commitment the student is the one that suffers.

Finally, I've learned a lot about myself this year. It was a difficult year but a challenging one. The obstacles and growing pains of inclusion that I encountered trained me well. This year has taught me the roles and responsibilities of an inclusion teacher which has given me clarity and comfort in this role. I found the depth of my commitment to my teaching vocation and I learned that special needs students placed into the inclusion setting are successful. The beautiful poems (appendix) written by my inclusion class during my March observation confirmed their success as well as my own. Our success was validated by my supervisor and acknowledged by my inclusion partner, as she witnessed how my differentiated strategies could inspire the best from each student. I dare to say that I taught my inclusion partner something as well. I learned that I enjoy working in this setting and being part of a general education classroom. My teaching expertise offers many strategies that can assist needs students as well as struggling general education students. In addition, inclusion offers me the opportunity to work collaboratively with experienced and talented colleagues and share teaching strategies.

In the 2007-2008 school year, I will be working with a general education teacher who has been teaching in an inclusion setting for four years. I look forward to expand my teaching practice and learn from this master inclusion teacher and share what I have learned about inclusion.

## References

*The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language Fourth Edition.*

Retrieved July 16,2007, from Dictionary.com website:

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/collaboration>.

*The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition.*

Retrieved July 16, 2007, from Dictionary.com website:

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/communication>.

*The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition.*

Retrieved July 16,2007, from Dictionary.com website:

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/conflict>.

Chrisman, V. (2005, February). How Schools Sustain Success. *Educational Leadership*, 16-20.

*The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition.*

Retrieved July 16,2007, from Dictionary.com website:

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/success>.

Department of Education Washington, DC, US (2003). *Twenty-third annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.*

*Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1).* Retrieved July 16, 2007, from Dictionary.com website:

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cooperation>.

Fleming, J. L. & Monda-Amaya, L. E. (2001, May/June). Process variables critical for team effectiveness, a delphi study of wraparound team members. *Remedial and Special Education*, 22, 158-171.

Glenn, L. (2005, June). A purposeful approach to teamwork. *Academic Leader*, 21, 6-7.

Gut, D. M., Oswald, K., Leal, D. J., Frederiksen, L. & Gustafson, J. M. (2003, March). Building the foundations of inclusive education through collaborative teacher preparation: a university-school partnership. *College Student Journal*, 37, 111-127.

Johnson, B. (2003, December). Teaching Collaboration: good for some, not so good for others. *Educational Studies*, 29(4), 337-350.

Jordan, J. V. (1986). The meaning of mutuality. *Work In Progress*, 23, 1-13.

Jordan, J. V. (1992). Relational resilience. *Work In Progress*, 57, 1-13.

Lowry, D. (2004). *Keys to personal success*. (4th ed.). California: True Colors.

O'Shea, D. J., Lee, W. A., & Sattler, R. O. (1999). Collaboration across special education and general education: Preservice teachers' views. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 50 (2), 147-157.

Retrieved March 8, 2007 from [www.diversity schooldistrict.org/content/district/about.htm](http://www.diversity schooldistrict.org/content/district/about.htm).

Retrieved March 8, 2007 from [www.diversitydistrict.org/content/special/specialed.htm](http://www.diversitydistrict.org/content/special/specialed.htm).

Retrieved March 8, 2007 from [www.weac.org/resource/june96/speced.htm](http://www.weac.org/resource/june96/speced.htm).

Villa, R. A. & Thousand, J. S. (2003, October). Making inclusive education work.. *Educational Leadership*, 19-23.

Wilford, S. (2006, March). Collaboration: What does it mean for your program?

Working together means much more than cooperation. *Scholastic Early Childhood Today*, 15-16.

*WordNet*® 3.0. Retrieved July 31, 2007, from Dictionary.com website:

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/mutuality>.

Tomlinson, C. A. (2003, October). Deciding to teach them all. *Educational Leadership*, 7-11.

Running head: SUBJECTIVITY AND IMPLEMENTATION

Subjectivity and Implementation

**Noemi** EDUC 602

Inquiry in Practice Date: July

31, 2007

## Subjectivity

As I started the *Exploration into Inquiry* course and delved into the many aspects of research I might engage in, I found the question evolved from a challenging teaching relationship I encountered at the beginning of the school year. When I began working on my research inquiry "How do I support the goals of my special needs students in an inclusion setting?" I thought it was all about working with a reluctant partner. The research inquiry was supposed to be a personal story but I found that I was taking it too personally. My assumption was that I would get through this year kicking and fighting all the way. It was difficult for me. I was frustrated and at times I had to sit back as an observer. I felt like a teacher's aide as my abilities were undermined by the teacher. There were times she asked me to make copies and make deliveries. I perceived this as her need to claim her territory in front of the students and exert her power over her classroom. I took a step back and realized that my colleague's reluctance was probably not about me. As I got to know her personally and professionally, I saw that this was just her personality and there was no changing that. At that point, my journey took a turn which inspired me to shift my focus towards my students. After I adjusted my thinking, I found that our working relationship improved.

Since I developed my inquiry question early in the process, I began journaling in October 2007. As this was the most difficult time of my inclusion relationship, I was able to gain insight into the behaviors which contributed to my distress. I found journaling to be an excellent source of data to track my own reflections.

The RTC classes I was attending to complete my Master's Degree gave me additional ways to collect data. I created an online teacher's survey and began collecting e-mail addresses from my class participants to create a mailing list for survey implementation. This worked very

well because ■ was including different perspectives from teachers across a variety of districts and teaching levels. The survey was anonymous so the participants were very open in sharing their comments.

The RTC course, *Styles of Teaching*, gave me valuable tools to analyze our teaching personalities and helped me understand how we could work together. This personality analysis also led to a discussion with my inclusion partner about the differences and similarities between us.

As I collected my literature sources, I found the areas I researched confirmed that I was on the right track as one resource would lead me to another.

The most challenging part of my research came when it was time to analyze the data. I finally hit the wall I kept hearing about. I had so much data and wasn't sure how I would organize it. Do I treat each data source individually or do I compile the data and go back and forth? This was the most difficult part of the process for me. Coding the data in my journal was very confusing. All the themes overlapped! I set some initial codes such as collaboration, communication, conflict, teamwork, differentiation, flexibility, and classroom management. Then I found there were too many codes so I refined the codes to communication, cooperation, collaboration, and conflict. However, the codes continued to overlap and blur together so I looked up the dictionary definitions for clarification. Then I took some of the initial codes and incorporated them under the main headings. Flexibility was filed under cooperation and teamwork and differentiation were included under collaboration. Classroom management went with conflict. The data was put in order of frequency and occurrence in my situation. Applicable data from the online survey, the literature review, my journal, and observations was intertwined

within the codes. Once I worked through that major obstacle, I was able to work through the data and the process flowed well.

I had difficulty distinguishing between implications and implementations because I will make implementations as a result of my implications. This part of the inquiry was my next obstacle so I took a break for a few days. Once I got back to writing my implications, I was able to separate what I had learned from how I would proceed with my new found knowledge. When I arrived at the implementation portion of the paper, it was simply applying what I had learned during my inquiry research and how I would incorporate my experience to my next teaching assignment.



## Implementation

How will I apply everything I have learned this year? My implementation started at the end of 2006-2007 school year. As I was working through my inquiry, I shared some inclusion articles with my administrator. I also communicated the challenges of working with an inclusion partner without having a common planning period and he is incorporating common planning periods for the upcoming school year. Another suggestion I made was to communicate next year's teaching assignments during the summer months so teachers could begin discussing plans or simply get to know one another prior to September. It was apparent that my suggestions were valuable as my administrator just sent out a notice to all teachers with the current teaching assignments for September. I plan to discuss my data implications with my administrator and the child study team in order to make inclusion more successful in our school. I will advise the special education department that there is a need for inclusion training for all teachers assigned to teach in that setting. I am recommending that our school staff take RTC's *Styles of Teaching* course which would give the administration some insight into their staff's personality types to facilitate them when developing teaching assignments. I will also suggest that an inclusion job outline be created defining roles and responsibilities for both general education and special education teachers. Finally, I believe that the child study team needs to have a process in place to support both inclusion partners to ensure that all student modifications are met. Hopefully, my suggestions will be considered and possibly implemented.

Personally, I can contribute my findings with my colleagues and I now have a concrete plan to begin my next inclusion relationship. At the beginning of the school year, I will discuss ground rules with my partner regarding resolving conflict, classroom management, planning, collaboration, communication, and teaching strategies. I can open up the channels of

communication and ask questions that will set the tone for our relationship. I will communicate my needs to provide support and contribute to the inclusion classroom. The following are a list of questions that could open up the discussion:

How do we teach together? Team teach? Co-teach? Alternate lessons?

When do we plan? How do we plan? How often do we meet?

How do we get to know one another?

How will we handle behavior issues in the classroom?

How do we resolve conflict?

How do we communicate with parents?

My goal is to have my next inclusion assignment be a partnership from the beginning and I'm very excited about sharing everything I have learned with my new partner. It's important to set those goals and rules at the beginning of the year and model that teacher respect and unity to the students, parents and administrators.

Am I too idealistic about the inclusion program? Are my implementations realistic?

Well, I suppose I will never know unless I try. Perhaps I can't change the world or fix inclusion, but I can make my own contributions that may help at least one child at a time and that alone will make it all worthwhile!