

# "I've counted Jon": Transformational Experiences of Teachers Educating Students with Disabilities

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**ABSTRACT:** *The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences in general education teachers who have had a student with severe disabilities in their class. Interviews of 19 general education teachers, kindergarten through Grade 9, as well as questionnaires completed by 18 teachers, were analyzed using categorical coding procedures to identify themes related to the teachers' experiences. Results showed that despite teachers' initial negative reactions to the placement of a child with severe disabilities in their classrooms, 17 teachers described transforming experiences of a more positive nature and related many benefits to the students with disabilities, their classmates, and the teachers themselves. Respondents also characterized what support services they found helpful and not helpful.*

At the beginning of the year, if I was making copies of something I might forget to count Jon: I just didn't deal with him .... When I count the kids in my class now, I've counted Jon. It just took me a while.

These were the words of a teacher as she described a transformation in her perspective related to educating a child with severe disabilities in her general education, 2nd-grade class. Her personal and professional beliefs about her ability to teach a class that included a student with severe disabilities had changed as a result of her experience with one student. Similar to many other general education teachers, she had no formal training to prepare her for this endeavor. Instead, she had followed the advice of a colleague to "go to another school where they have children like Jon and observe and talk to those teachers who do have the experience." The purpose of this study was to explore what these teachers would say, that is, to understand the experiences and perspectives of general education teachers who had students with severe disabilities in their classes.

Although many educators support the inclusion of most students with disabilities in general education classes (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987; Will, 1986), some question the appropriateness of extending the general class placement option to students with severe disabilities (Jenkins, Pious, & Jewell, 1990). Much of the national debate regarding the appropriateness of general class placement for all students has remained theoretical and speculative. On a more concrete level, there is an increasing availability and growing support for the placement of students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms (Giangreco & Putnam, 1991; Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Stainback & Stainback, 1991; Thousand & Villa, 1990; Williams, Fox, Thousand, & Fox, 1990; York & Vandercook, 1990).

In Vermont, students with severe disabilities have been receiving special education supports in general education class placements since 1984 (Schattman, 1992; Thousand et al., 1986; Williams et al., 1986). Most Vermont school districts offer some integrated educational programs for students who were previously segregated in special classes or special schools. A growing number of districts are including all of their students with disabilities, including those with severe disabilities, in general education placements and are no longer providing a special class model (Thousand & Villa, 1990).

The classrooms described in this article are not presented as model sites, although some may be. Their approach to the education of students with severe disabilities, however, reflects emerging support for the inclusion of students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms and challenges traditional notions regarding the need for centralized special classes or special schools. This study examines the first-hand experiences and perspectives of many general education teachers who have taught students with severe disabilities in their general education classes.

## **METHOD**

### **Subjects**

The subjects of this study were 19 general education teachers who worked in 10 Vermont public schools teaching kindergarten through Grade 9. Teachers were selected to be interviewed based on three criteria: (a) sometime during the last 3 years they had had a student who was identified as severely disabled in their general education classroom on a full-time basis, or in one case two of the teachers shared a student throughout the year in a departmentalized arrangement; (b) these students met the Vermont definition of being dual sensory impaired or "at risk for dual sensory impairment" (Vermont Department of Education, 1987); and (c) these students were served by the Vermont I-Team's Dual Sensory Impairment Project, a statewide service providing training and technical assistance to educational teams serving Vermont students with intensive special education needs.

As Table 1 shows, most of the students with whom these teachers worked also had severe orthopedic disabilities (e.g., nonambulatory, limited use of hands/arms) and functioned as though they had severe cognitive impairments. It should be noted that the labels of mental retardation used in Table I should not be construed as measures of ability. Given

these students' combined sensory and motoric disabilities, it often is difficult to accurately determine their level of cognitive functioning and subsequently to determine which of their impairments is most responsible for the students' profoundly delayed level of functioning.

Fourteen of the teachers were women, five were men. Their teaching experience ranged from 2 to 21 years. All were certified in general education; three also had special education certification. Only two of the teachers reported receiving any inservice training designed to prepare them for including a student with severe disabilities in a general education classroom any time during the 3 years preceding the student's placement. All 19 teachers had a paraprofessional (e.g., teacher aide) assigned to their classrooms; access to ongoing support from district or regional special educators and related service personnel (e.g., physical therapists, speech/language pathologists); and intermittent support from members of the Vermont I-Team.

### **Data Collection Method**

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary method for data collection, because they would give the teachers a forum to share their experiences and give the interviewer the opportunity to ask follow-up questions. The interview protocol allowed for the initial set of questions to be presented in nonstandardized ways or in a different order, so that each interviewer could individualize question-asking (see Table 2). Teachers were asked ongoing follow-up questions, thus providing the opportunity to verify the data being recorded (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In the spring of 1991, teachers were contacted by phone and asked if they were willing to be interviewed regarding their experiences teaching a student with severe disabilities in the general education classroom. All 19 teachers agreed to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted between March and June 1991 in private rooms located at the schools where the teachers worked and were tape-recorded, with teacher permission. Interviews ranged in length from 45 to 90 min.

Each interview began with a review of the purposes of the research and assurances of confidentiality. Next, the interviewer noted background information about the teacher on a separate data sheet (see Table 1). Initial interview questions and follow-up questions were asked until the interview was concluded.

Following the interview, each teacher was given a two-page survey and a self-addressed stamped envelope. Page 1 included questions to verify the background information about the teacher (e.g., grade taught, years of experience). Page 2 consisted of seven statements and an open-comments section. Teachers responded to the statements using a Likert-style scale (1 = "strongly disagree," 10 = "strongly agree"). Five statements were used for evaluation of service delivery practices through the I-Team and are not reported in this study. Two statements were directly relevant to this investigation. These were: "My attitudes about educating students with significant disabilities in general education have

**TABLE 1**  
**Summary of Information Regarding General Education Teachers**

Teacher	Grades Taught	Sex	Education	Certification	Years Experience	Years with DSI Student	Interviewer*	Student Characteristics
1	K	M	Bachelor's	Elementary	15	1	MG	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
2	K	F	Bachelor's	Elementary	6	1	MG	DSI, severe orthopedic disability
3	K	F	Bachelor's	Elementary & Special Education	2	1	MG	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
4	K	F	Bachelor's	Elementary	8	1	MG	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
5	1	F	Master's	Elementary	17	1	MG	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
6	1	F	Bachelor's	Elementary	4	1	MG	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
7	2	F	Bachelor's	Elementary	20	1	RS	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
8	2	F	Bachelor's	Elementary	2	1	MG	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
9	2-3	F	Master's	Elementary & Special Education	10	2	MG	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
10	3	M	Master's	Elementary	18	1	CC	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
11	3	M	Master's	Elementary	18	1	RS	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
12	3	F	Master's	Elementary	7	1	RS	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
13	3	F	Bachelor's	Elementary	13	1	MG	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
14	4	F	Bachelor's	Elementary	2	1	RS	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability

**TABLE 1**  
**(continued)**

Teacher	Grades Taught	Sex	Education	Certification	Years Experience	Years with DSI Student	Interviewer*	Student Characteristics
15	4	F	Master's	Elementary	14	1	CC	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
16	4-5	F	Master's	Elementary & Special Education	6	1	MG	DSI, mild retardation
17	5	F	Master's	Elementary	21	1	CC	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
18	8 Science	M	Master's	Education	13	1	SE	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
19	9 Social Studies	M	Master's	Social Studies Education	12	1	CC	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability

*Note:* DSI = dual sensory impairment.

\* MG = Michael Giangreco; RS = Richard Schattman; CC = Chigee Cloninger; SE = Susan Edelman

**TABLE 2**  
**Initial Interview Questions**

1. How did a student with significant disabilities get placed in your general education classroom?
2. How has inclusion of the student with significant disabilities in your classroom affected you as a teacher and person?
3. How has inclusion of the student with significant disabilities in your classroom affected that student?
4. How has inclusion of the student with significant disabilities in your classroom affected the other (non-disabled) students?
5. What advice would you offer to others who are attempting to include students with significant disabilities in general education classes?

become more positive as a result of teaching a child with significant disabilities," and "Given appropriate supports, I would welcome a student with significant disabilities in my class in the future." Surveys were obtained from 18 of the 19 teachers.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

To ensure that the principal investigator was thoroughly familiar with the data before data analysis, he listened to all interview tapes, read each transcribed interview as each was completed, and re-read all interview transcripts after they were completed. Analysis of interview data consisted of categorical coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Initially 81 codes (e.g., expectations, disruptions, support) were developed to describe portions of text. After the initial coding of all interviews, each interview transcript was re-coded by adding, combining, or separating previously coded text. These 57 subsequent codes assisted in identifying emerging themes in the data.

Given the volume of interview data, HyperQual (Padilia, 1990), a text-sorting program, was used to sort the data by code. HyperQual was used to generate 57 code-specific reports. These reports reorganized text data into related groups. This assisted with the identification of themes and subthemes that could then be considered for analysis. Once themes were identified, positive and negative occurrences were highlighted and organized to assist in understanding the interview data. The research team reviewed these sequenced themes to ensure that the analysis was consistent with and not contradictory to their interview experiences with the teachers. Statistical computation of survey data was conducted using the Statistical Analysis System (SAS, 1985).

### **Member Checks**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained the importance of testing the constructions of researchers for factual and interpretative accuracy to establish evidence of credibility and confirmability. In September 1991, a report including the description of the study's subjects and the results of analyses from the interview data were sent to all 19 teachers. They were asked to read the report and answer the following questions:

1. Are you satisfied that your anonymity was maintained so you are not personally identifiable?
2. Based on your interview, do you find the content of the report accurate?
3. Were quotes you gave in your interview, if used, used accurately and appropriately?
4. Do the themes presented in this report include the information you gave us in your interview?

A space was also available for the teachers to make any additional comments that might help the researchers more fully understand their perspective. Teachers returned their member-check forms in a self-addressed stamped envelope. Teachers who did not return

their forms within 2 weeks were contacted by phone to respond verbally to the member-check questions. Eighteen of the 19 teachers responded to the member check. Respondents' recommendations were limited to minor errors regarding teachers' characteristics (e.g., years of experience, type of certification). All teachers responded affirmatively to the substantive aspects of Questions 1-4. Sixteen of the 18 responding teachers commented positively about the results, two did not. Teacher responses were used to adjust the final presentation of the study.

## RESULTS

### Initial Experiences and Reactions

Each teacher in this study had a student with severe disabilities in his or her general education class. The majority of teachers in this study were asked or volunteered to accept a student with severe disabilities in their classes. Most teachers stated that acceptance of a student with severe disabilities was contingent on receipt of "supports" (e.g., paraprofessional, consultant, technical assistance). In addition, most teachers agreed to the placement of a student with severe disabilities in their class with an understanding that the placement was not necessarily permanent, and could be changed at any time during the school year. "We decided we would try it. It was pretty much done on a trial basis to begin with." The initial placement was also considered a choice that most teachers could accept or reject. As one middle school teacher said, "She [special educator] made it very clear that I did not have to do it. She didn't want to push me into it, and it would be fine if I said 'No.' "

Regardless of how the student with severe disabilities was placed in the general education class, most teachers reacted to the initial placement in a cautious or negative manner. They described their feelings with the terms, "reluctant," "scared," "nervous," "leery," "apprehensive," "unqualified," "angry," and "worried." One teacher said, "I didn't know much about how to deal with him and how to respond to him and interact with him. I was afraid." Another pondered, "I certainly was wondering how she was going to fit in, how I was going to include her in everything, not having experience myself; not knowing what to expect." Others questioned the wisdom of such a placement:

My reaction was, I don't feel like she belongs in a public school. She was so extremely handicapped and I remember what she looked like. Her hands were always in front of her face and she just didn't seem to have any connection with the world around her.

The initial reactions to the placement of students with severe disabilities led to a series of teacher expectations regarding their own roles. One common approach used by special educators and administrators to alleviate a teacher's fear or concern was to establish the teacher's role as that of a host. Someone else (e.g., special educator, paraprofessional) would have the primary or exclusive responsibility for educating the child. Many teachers embraced this understanding by saying, "If I wanted to be a special educator I would have gone into special education." One primary grade teacher explained, "I guess the

focus was more on he's going to be in there; we are going to see how it works. The aide is going to take care of him. I guess that was how I looked at it; I wasn't going to have much to do with him, so why not let them try it?" As a result, some teachers initially did not view themselves as the child's teacher in the same way they saw themselves as the teacher for the other students in the class.

Often, a teacher aide or assistant, without the benefit of training related to inclusionary practices, had the primary responsibility for day-to-day decision making and program implementation. Frequently these paraprofessionals had correspondingly limited contact with the hosting classroom teacher. As a result, different teachers explained:

I don't think of him as one of the children that I educate.

I'm basically in charge of the nondisabled kids' academic curriculum.

The aide will be more or less responsible for seeing to his needs.

To be honest, we've included her very little .... You're very busy with other students, and she kind of gets lost in the shuffle.

As far as being trained, in knowing specifics about how to adapt the activity for Sam's needs, I didn't feel competent in making those decisions. And the aide that was in my room at the time was very good at taking the activity that I was doing with the other children and pulling Sam in on it.

Interestingly, some teachers expressed greater confidence in the abilities of untrained, substantively unsupervised, paraprofessionals than they did in their own abilities.

## **Transforming**

For two teachers, the initial experiences remained relatively unchanged throughout the school year, characterized by lack of ownership for the child's education.

I can't actually say that there were too many times that I sat down with Linda and actually did things with her; I never specifically worked with Linda.

I still haven't really connected with her.

I never felt like I really developed a relationship with him like you do with a child going through the year.



Sometimes this lack of ownership was pronounced.

I'm so busy focusing on the other 22 kids that I don't even notice that she's here. Twice we left the room, once to go to lunch and once to go outside, forgetting that she was here and the aide wasn't in the room. The second time I realized when I got outside and sent a kid up right away, but the first time we had gone down to lunch I was totally oblivious because she was so quiet. My attention is totally on the other kids. I didn't notice whether she was present or absent, to be honest.

However, 17 of the 19 teachers experienced increased ownership and involvement with the student with severe disabilities in their classes over the course of the school year. We refer to this as transformation. The extent of transformation varied widely among teachers. Those who experienced changes challenged their original expectations for the student with severe disabilities and for themselves. They increased their responsibility for the student's educational program and their personal interaction with the student. The cautious and negative comments used to discuss their initial reactions were replaced by descriptors such as, "positive," "good," "successful," "interesting," "amazed," "pleased," "great," "wonderful," and "enjoyment."

The positive adjectives used by teachers to describe their experiences were verified by their responses to the survey statements. In response to the statement, "My attitudes about educating students with significant disabilities in general education have become more positive as a result of teaching a child with significant disabilities," the teachers indicated strong agreement by responding with a mean score of 8.59 (SD = 2.46) on the 10-point scale. Fourteen of the teachers rated this item 8 or higher; 10 teachers gave it the highest agreement score (10). The standard deviation was widened by one teacher who rated this item 1. This teacher's low rating was consistent with her interview, which indicated that transformation, as we have discussed it, did not occur for this person. In reference to the statement, "Given appropriate supports, I would welcome a student with significant disabilities in my class in the future," the teachers also indicated strong agreement by responding with a mean score of 8.74 (SD = 1.39).

Transformations were gradual and progressive rather than discrete and abrupt. Teachers described an emerging recognition that their initial expectations regarding the student with disabilities were based on unsubstantiated assumptions. This prompted teachers to reflect and reconsider previously assumed positions. Many made comments such as, "I always had the nagging feeling I'm not doing enough." Teachers also reported beginning to view the child as a person rather than a disability, and they established a personal relationship with the student. A number of teachers expressed their desire to have an impact on the student by teaching them. Teachers who had these experiences reportedly came to the realization they could be successful and that including the student was not as difficult as they had originally imagined. As one teacher said, "You don't know until you're actually in the trenches doing it; I just never found it to be difficult." Other teachers reiterated this notion by saying, "I don't feel I have really done that many things

differently; I didn't think it was a big deal" and "If they [teachers] stopped to think about the number of accommodations they are making for kids fight in their own classroom who aren't special ed., I think they would realize there is not much more we are asking." The following quotes typify the comments of teachers who underwent significant transformation.

I just realized that he had been in my classroom for a month or so, and I had no contact with him really. I have a student in my classroom, and I don't think I have even touched him. You know, I had so much physical contact with all the other first graders, patting them on the back, going up to them and talking to them. Other than saying

"Hi, Jon" when he came into the room, I basically didn't have any contact with him. I started realizing at that point that I have got to have some impact on him. He's one of my students. I had always said, "I have 13 students plus Jon," and then I realized: Why am I saying "plus Jon"? He's one of my students,

I think I started looking at it as, "I'm the teacher here." I'm the one that got the education, got the certificate for teaching. I'm responsible for every other student. I should be responsible for this student too,

I started seeing him as a little boy, I started feeling that he's a person too. He's a student. Why should I not teach him? He's in my class. That's my responsibility, I'm a teacher ! Just getting to know her made it more comfortable for me after a while.

But [by] having Ellen right there, you have to deal with it; and I found out that I can do it. There is nothing here that is very different than getting along with a whole lot of other people in life.

Teachers who transformed shared a number of experiences. They developed a willingness to (a) interact with the student, (b) learn skills needed to teach the student, and (c) change their attitudes toward the student. In some cases, teachers changed their attitudes about themselves as well. Teachers shared comments such as:

I made the full swing of fighting against having Bobbi Sue placed in my room to fighting for her to be in a mainstream classroom working with kids in the way that she had worked with them all year long. I'm a perfect example of how you have to have an open mind.

Nothing here is so outrageous that I can't learn it.

Now that I have dealt with her, I have rolled her down the hill and I've taken her sliding with the other kids and stuff. She's a little girl like everyone else.

When I started finally having some interactions with him, he would come right over with his walker up to my desk, hold onto the desk, and put his butt around like he wanted to get up on my lap. And I would pick him up and he would look up at me and smile and he would put his hand on my face, and so you knew when he was content.

The 17 teachers who changed reported an increase in their sense of ownership for the child's education.

It's easy to expect the aide to do everything lot that student, and then you think now you don't have to deal with it at all, but it doesn't .... I mean I suppose it could work that way, but I don't think that you would get much out of it.

I feel very comfortable with her. Very often I have her for periods in the classroom when the aides aren't there, and that's no problem at all.

I'm the one that's going to make the plans for that student. I'm responsible for his success in my classroom.

I think you have to see them as another one of the children in class who has some strengths, some weaknesses; and you need to find out where they are at and how you can help them.

To me, he was just one of the kids in the class. I think you really need to have that attitude.

Finally, these teachers displayed a willingness to learn from their students.

I started watching my own regular classroom students. They didn't treat him any differently. They went about their business like everything was normal. So I said, "If they can do it, I can do it." He's not getting in their way, they're treating him like everybody else.

I learned more from the kids than I think they learned from me because they were with Tim last year.

They were always letting me know when I forgot something. "You didn't remember to include Sarah." So they were very good at letting me know.

The kids help you figure it out.

### **Approaches Used by Teachers Who Transformed**

As mentioned previously, some teachers feared that they would need to use a lot of "special" materials and approaches for the student with severe disabilities in their class. Although these students did have many unique characteristics, a common approach used by teachers was to "treat him like any other kid in the class." One teacher explained, "I just included her in everything that we did." In part, this approach was motivated by the teacher's feeling that, "I didn't want to single her out and make her feel different in any way." The frequency with which the student with disabilities was included in the same activities as the other classmates, even when his or her educational objectives were different, seemed to be an indicator of the extent of teacher transformation. The teachers' approach was to recognize and build on the similarities among students with and without disabilities.

Teachers reported favoring approaches that encouraged students to learn together (e.g., cooperative learning, group problem-solving). They also emphasized approaches that were active, participatory, and typical rather than specialized (e.g., manipulatives, games, projects, labs, field study). One teacher said:

I don't try to lecture as much and cut down on that; and try to get activities, game playing, things like that. The class may be noisier or more active than a class which stresses lecture and just sitting there quietly.

### **What Was Helpful and What Wasn't?**

In Shel Silverstein's (1974) poem, "Helping," the refrain goes, "Some kind of help is the kind of help that helping is all about, and some kind of help is the kind of help we all can do without" (p. 101). Teachers reported experiencing both kinds of help. Teachers who found support personnel helpful cited four facilitating practices: (a) shared framework and goals, (b) physical presence, (c) validation of the teacher's contribution, and (d) teamwork.

Having a shared framework and goals meant that both the specialist and the teacher worked to include the student with disabilities in the general class routine. The helpful specialist's role was to assist the teacher in "how to incorporate her better; just how all the kids fit in ... how we could better make her fit in like everybody else." By helping the teacher include the student with disabilities in typical class activities, the specialist was using his or her unique skills and knowledge to pursue the same goals as the teacher, rather than pursuing separate goals.

Teachers reported that the physical presence of another person on whom they could rely was helpful; this minimized the feeling of being alone or totally responsible. Paraprofessionals were often mentioned as important support persons. This was partly a result of the frequency of contact paraprofessionals had with students and teachers. Specialists, such as integration facilitators, speech/language pathologists, and occupational therapists, were also perceived positively by teachers when they were present, available, and provided moral support. "The best support was Arlene [special educator]. She was excellent.

She was in, she checked every week." Others commented, "It's nice to have somebody there," or "I really don't have any concerns knowing that a backup system is in place."

While technical assistance that matched classroom needs was welcomed by teachers (e.g., adaptations, equipment), at times a simple validation of the challenges facing the teacher was sufficient for them to feel supported. One teacher cited the supportive nature of statements such as, "I know how you feel, but it's going to be all right. You are going to see after the first couple of weeks that he's just part of your class." Such comments highlight the importance of moral support.

An overriding theme of what teachers viewed as helpful and supportive was the value of teamwork. When teamwork was present, teachers reported feeling productive and supported. Experienced teams provided an ongoing source of technical, resource, evaluation, and moral support. When one elementary teacher was asked what advice he would offer other prospective teachers preparing to include a challenging student, he said he would ask, "Do you have a planning team? Who's on your team? Do you feel comfortable with that?" Teams helped organize the adults working together on behalf of an individual child.

With the presence of a child with severe disabilities comes an entourage of support personnel (e.g., special educators, physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech/language pathologists, vision specialists). Some teachers assumed that having all these specialists meant access to specialized expertise that would be helpful. Though this was true for some, it was not always the case. One teacher explained,

I came to realize that I don't think anybody really knew what to do .... I felt like I was not getting any support. I just felt like people were just coming in and people wanted to just see Jane and they wanted to hear how she talked; they just wanted to see how I worked with her, but nobody really gave me any suggestions of what to do.

There were kinds of "help" teachers felt they could do without. "Help" to address goals not identified or shared by teachers or referenced to the classroom program was not helpful. "Help" that disrupted the classroom routine, as well as "help" that was overly technical and specialized, was also identified as not helpful. Such "help" was sometimes confusing to teachers or considered irrelevant. "OT and PT is a separate thing; I really don't know what they do."

All the classroom teachers indicated that they were involved in important work with their entire class and that anything that interfered with their mission was unacceptable. Most teachers indicated that the presence of a student with disabilities did not create any more disruption than other students without disabilities. However, the presence of the specialists and other visitors that accompanied the student with disabilities did. There were problems with "traffic coming through the room." Teachers shared feelings like the following:

Somebody is visiting us again.

My big concern, I remember, was the number of people who came in and watched. That made me kind of shake in my boots. But as far as dealing with Ellen, that was fine,

If she weren't here, let's face it, the specialists wouldn't be here. I said, "I will take 20 Janes, but just don't give me any specialists behind me, because she really isn't the problem." Yes, it was a problem, but she wasn't the problem.

One kindergarten teacher described the situation:

Specialists [are] talking in the back of the room, disrupting what goes on. Not a clue that maybe I would like it quiet. So I'm saying to the kids, "You have to really be quiet in here, you need to follow my directions. I really would like it quiet," and I am even looking over at them [specialists].

Separate frameworks and goals often resulted in the use of "pullout" methods to provide specialized services. This solution created a new set of problems for classroom teachers. Some teachers described problems with separate pullout services because, "starting and ending times [were] at times so that it was really disruptive to then fill Paul in or get Paul started on whatever it is. We had to really switch the schedule around."

As mentioned before, teachers frequently favored the use of typical activities, materials, and approaches over special ones. This approach was challenged by some specialists who sought to enhance the student's school experience through their specialized techniques and materials. One teacher indicated that specialists "get so specialized that they overlook the simple things. It takes common sense." When specialists recommended approaches not typical for the classrooms, they were not always greeted with open arms. One teacher discussed an example where a highly specialized feeding program was suggested by an occupational therapist.

I just think it's a little humiliating for Jane to learn to feed herself in front of the other kids. ... And the way they were going to do it, it sounded like they were going to rig up this really cumbersome thing and nail it to the cafeteria table.

We might as well put a sign over her and say, "Look, we are practicing over here, you guys go right ahead and eat." It would be like a freak show.

Teachers recognized that some "special" approaches were helpful and necessary, while others are potentially unnecessary and stigmatizing. When it went too far, some teachers developed the assertiveness to say, "I put my foot down and said, 'No, you can't come into the classroom' or 'No, I don't need that kind of help. Thank you anyway.'"

### **Impact of the General Education Placement**

Teachers reported that the participation of a student with severe disabilities in their class had a positive impact on the child with disabilities, as well as on the child's classmates. Teachers also reported benefits for themselves both personally and professionally. Conversely, teachers who did not experience transformation perceived minimal benefits from a similar experience. The following sections detail experiences of the 17 teachers who reported some level of transformation.

***Benefits of Inclusion in General Education Classes for Students with Severe Disabilities.*** According to many teachers, some of the students with severe disabilities experienced improvement in their awareness and responsiveness to their teachers, support staff, and classmates, as well as the routines of the class. One teacher compared her initial observations of a student in a special class with the same child's behavior in her 3rd-grade room.

I think she became much more aware of her environment because of being in my classroom. Being in the other [self-contained] classroom, there wasn't anything to be awake for because there wasn't anything really going on; whereas in my classroom and in any regular ed classroom there are always kids there, doing things, talking, just there. And so she had a reason to be more alert and could be more involved with her environment because there was something to be involved with. So there was a purpose to her life rather than sleeping.

In addition, a high school teacher commented:

When he sees me now, he reacts to me. He'll put his hand out to touch me; he'll smile and he laughs. He came into class wearing a Red Sox hat and I gave him a Phillies hat, telling him that when he comes into class I'm a Phillies fan, So the next day he comes in wearing his Phillies hat. So he reacts to me now. So he recognizes me, he responds to me. He'll laugh. I could talk to him and communicate to a certain degree with him.

A second benefit for the students with disabilities included in general education classes was skill acquisition. Students learned a variety of communication, social, motor, academic, and other skills to assist in participation in home, school, and community life. One teacher indicated:

He is growing accustomed to the way people do things. He is more able to carry on a conversation and stay relevant for more than two sentences. He is learning turn taking; I'm sure that it was worked on before, but I think in a regular classroom you really learn it or someone is on your case all the time.

Some teachers indicated that skill development was only one potential benefit of general class placement. They spoke about other aspects of the child's school experience that enhanced the quality of the student's life. The general education placement provided the students with opportunities, enjoyment, and challenges.

Even if she is plateauing, she's still being challenged. There are new things that people try to make her do or get her to do even if she is just doing all she's ever done before; it may be more than laying around on the floor.

Sometimes during music class when they would be singing, Susie would almost laugh because she was hearing the song; and even though she wasn't singing, she was enjoying it, being part of it by just being there.

I think that just opens up so many doors and avenues and there are role models there; and there are just so many other things available to them that wouldn't be available if they were in a room with children who were very similar to themselves.

He taught them [people at school] that he can learn.

***Classmates' Experiences.*** Teachers discussed benefits of inclusion for the students without disabilities in their classes. A common theme was awareness of the needs of people with disabilities. Teachers also described a range of acceptance of the student with disabilities by classmates that resembled those among other students. For example, there would be some students in the class who would "seek him out" and "gravitate" toward him without encouragement. The majority of students accepted his presence and were rather nonchalant about it.

I also saw in them the willingness to have him there in that room, to treat him like everybody else; that they didn't feel that he was any different.



I never heard them say, "Poor Jon ," or "Jon can't do this, Jon can't do that." It was always, "Come on, Jon, let's go!" Never any pitying attitude.

Teachers indicated that those children who sought out the student with a disability "accept her readily, they enjoy having her, they get excited about little projects that she does and her successes; they like sitting next to her in circle." Although not a universal experience, several of the children with disabilities had classmates without disabilities as "best buddies." They would "take him to lunch or hang out with him on the playground." An elementary teacher shared the following experience:

One little boy wanted to take him home, to stay overnight, like he would any other friend. The mother was quite reluctant and said, "No, because I don't know what we are going to do with him." She was very nervous about it.

But finally, the little boy said to her, "Mom, you let me have other friends over. Why can't I have Jon over? He's just like anybody else." And she realized that if he can look at it that way, she would be able to. So she had him over .... She said it really opened her eyes to see her son playing with this little boy just like he was anybody else; he had him outside talking and laughing and playing with him, just like anybody else.

Some teachers attributed these experiences of students to an increased level of social/emotional development, flexibility, and empathy.

***Personal and Professional Impact of Inclusion on the Teachers.*** Teachers who transformed discussed how their experiences caused them to be more reflective.

It made me more aware of how important it is for someone like that to be included... to be with her peers, to be in a regular classroom.

It makes you stop and think about an awful lot.

I was ashamed of myself for feeling the way I did at the beginning of the year, that I had this opinion and belief when I really didn't know anything about it.

Several teachers recognized their importance as a model for the class.

The first few weeks they [students without disabilities] were watching me .... They really looked toward me to see: Is this OK? They watch the adults and see what their reaction is and then model them. I mean that is a real

important part of education, what you model. I also think kids accept things quicker than adults in some ways.

One of the most important things to teach kids about is that everyone is different and unique and that's OK; and we are all kind of doing the best we can. I just feel that that is a really important lesson.

Teachers experienced a sense of pride at their own openness to change.

I was proud of myself for letting myself change my mind. You know, that I wasn't stubborn enough, that I wasn't open to new ideas and learning something new .... I'm glad that I was open, that I could change my mind because it made me feel better as a person to know that I gave somebody a chance and that I knew in the future that if it ever came to that again that I would do the same.

Some teachers reported an increased level of confidence: "Personally, professionally it's like I can deal with anybody!" Confidence was reflected in their ability to approach teaching in a more flexible manner.

I think before I always had high expectations, and I used to really plan. If things didn't go exactly the way I planned them, then I felt like I was a failure, I wasn't teaching right, or somehow it was something I was doing. All of the sudden you can make such a learning experience out of anything. So professionally it was great for me.

I really think it changed the way I teach a lot. I think it was really for the better. I think it made me more flexible.

It helped me to understand that all people learn differently and have different things that they can do.

The teachers' experiences had an impact on the way they taught not only the student with disabilities, but the other children as well.

It helped me be a better planner.

I've used a lot of the ideas that I started out using last year because I spent a lot of time thinking about them to incorporate Katie. I've used them again this year even though I don't have a special needs kid and because I found them successful with the regular ed kids. But my purpose in developing them was thinking about Katie.

One elementary school teacher summed it up when she said, "Anything that dramatic has to make you more aware of everybody's needs."

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study emphasized descriptions about the placement of students with disabilities in the general education classrooms from the frame of reference of teachers who experienced it. Although the points raised in this section may have implications for others interested in school inclusion issues, the results and analyses discussed here reflect findings based solely on the 19 teachers interviewed and their classrooms; therefore, generalization to other settings should not be inferred.

Teachers in this study shared a common initial experience that they typically described in negative terms. The experience was characterized by minimal involvement with the student with disabilities. In addition, most teachers had the expectation that someone else was responsible for the student's education. Although the initial status of two teachers remained unchanged throughout the school year, 17 of the 19 teachers reported experiencing varying degrees of change in their own expectations and behavior toward the student with disabilities. Subsequent to these changes, teachers identified a variety of benefits to the student, classmates without disabilities, and themselves.

The two teachers who did not change recognize that their involvement with the student with disabilities was minimal. This points out a key difference between teachers who changed and those who did not. Teachers who changed were not only willing to become directly involved with the student with disabilities, but they took action to become involved with the student.

Why do some teachers take action to become involved while others do not? Teachers who risked becoming involved with the student with disabilities reported that it was not as difficult as they had first imagined. In some cases the willingness to change may be more heavily influenced by a set of personal characteristics of the teacher, rather than by external factors (e.g., school characteristics, child characteristics). The theory that teacher characteristics are critical to the change process was supported by the descriptions of teachers in the same school, with similar professional experiences. These teachers described extremely different experiences with the same child from year to year. For example, Karen was in a third- and fourth-grade classroom for 2 consecutive years in the same school. Both of Karen's teachers described transforming experiences for themselves, as well as benefits to Karen and her classmates. Karen's fifth-grade teacher in the same school reported no transforming experiences. This teacher questioned whether the general education placement was of any benefit to Karen; reported some minimal benefits for classmates, as well as negative reactions of classmates; and reported no impact on herself as the teacher. Further research should address internal and external factors that may influence an individual's, or an entire system's, response to educational innovations.

One piece of data that appeared benign at the outset of this study represents an important foundational concern regarding the equity of educational opportunities for children with

disabilities and their rights to an appropriate education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990. Several teachers reported being offered the option to accept or reject the student with disabilities in their classroom. Though the rationale for providing teachers with options may be understandable (e.g., trying not to force a teacher to assume a responsibility for which he or she feels unprepared or simply wishes to avoid), such a choice represents a double standard that simply would not be tolerated based on other individual differences among students (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic level, religion, political affiliation). What if no one says "Yes"? In a national and state system that purports equal access and education for all students, such choices to reject or accept a student based on a teacher's individual values and predispositions is a contradiction in terms. We contend that educational equity will continue to elude us as long as we apply different standards to students whom we are unaccustomed to teaching.

One of the interesting aspects of the background data was that these teachers did not have much, if any, training to prepare them for the experience of having a student with severe disabilities in their class. Yet almost all teachers described successful experiences following their initial apprehensions. Whereas preparatory training may be beneficial, these data suggest that the direct experience of working with the child on an ongoing basis was a critical factor in the transformation of teachers; and episodic training is unlikely to simulate this experience. There was some speculation by teachers that their initial fears often interfered with their internalizing skills taught in more traditional workshops and inservice training. This finding has implications for both the content of training and the timing of its delivery. For example, once a class placement decision has been made, initial training might consist of information about (a) other teachers' feelings and experiences in similar situations; (b) critical factors influencing success to start the year (e.g., teamwork, expectations of ownership, interaction with the student, learning from the class), and (c) approaches described by experienced teachers as successful (e.g., activity-based approaches, use of typical materials and activities, group strategies).

Clearly, the students with whom these teachers worked had characteristics that required some level of specialized support within a teamwork context. It seems evident that paraprofessional support was critical in some situations. Participants in this study had varied and diverse opinions regarding the role and responsibilities of paraprofessionals in the classroom. A clear job description for paraprofessionals that matches the needs of students in general education settings and their teachers appears needed. Paraprofessional support may be an important factor, external to the teacher, that has an impact on the level and rate of transformation. When paraprofessionals assume, or are directed to take, primary or exclusive ownership for the student's education, they may inadvertently create physical, psychological, or symbolic barriers to interactions between the teacher, classmates, and student with disabilities.

The role of specialists was viewed as both facilitative of and a barrier to the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes. The kind of help teachers said they could do without (i.e., separate goals by specialists, disruption to the class routine, overspecialization) often occurred when specialists attempted to transplant traditional special education practices into general education environments. This was neither

welcomed nor considered helpful by general education teachers. The inclusion of students with severe disabilities in general education settings required specialists to more fully consider the context of the general education class and ensure that their support respected the values and needs of the general education classroom, its students, and the teacher.

The perspectives described by the teachers in this study are valuable because a relatively small number of general education teachers have shared experiences similar to those described here. Undoubtedly, the number is increasing with the passing of every school year. Although it is our hope that the experiences of these teachers will help other teachers facing similar challenges, our ultimate hope is that such an article will be obsolete in the near future. As Biklen and Knoll (1987) so clearly articulated, "Integration survives as an issue only so long as someone is segregated" (p. 21).

[TABULAR DATA OMITTED]

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