MTRP

Maintaining an Inclusive Environment for Students with Learning Disabilities: Taking a Look at Social Inclusion Strategies

By

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Abstract

This Masters of Teaching Research Project is a qualitative study that will measure the various strategies that teachers implement within the classroom. This research is not limited only to measuring strategies that pertain to assistance with academics. This research will also measure strategies that teachers utilize to help students with social cohesion and maintaining inclusivity within the classroom. Additionally, apart from looking at the strategies that pertain to academic instruction and the curriculum, this research focuses on strategies that are used to assist students with learning disabilities in becoming more socially adjusted within the classroom.

This study brings forth the reality that students with learning disabilities face on a daily basis and part of its purpose is to inform teaching professionals on ways that they can both confront these issues and provide appropriate supports. I believe that students who have learning disabilities are more at risk of becoming discouraged or unmotivated. As a former student, and now a teacher candidate, I can see how students can become disconnected from the rest of the class. This can and does result in poor academic performance and insecurity.

In order to conduct this research, two interviews will be conducted. Secondary analysis of previous data and research will also be analyzed for relevant information. Finally, qualitative data will be collected on the basis of participant observation during my practicum placement.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter One: Introduction</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of Study</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background of Researcher</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Two: Literature Review</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Collaboration</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer-to-Peer Strategies</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-to-Peer Strategies</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Inclusion &amp; Transparency</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Three: Methodology

Procedure

Instruments of Data Collection

Participants

Data Collection & Analysis

Ethical Reviews & Procedures

Limitations

Chapter Four: Findings

The Diverse Classroom

Peer-to-Peer Strategies

Teacher-to-Peer Strategies

Practices Outside of the Classroom

Obstacles

Chapter Five: Discussion

Implications for Practice

Conclusions & Further Study
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

References 41

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions 42
Appendix B: Letter of Consent 44
Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Research Study

The terms inclusivity and differentiated instruction have been circulating within the world of education for some time now. Members of the various school boards have become very active in demonstrating and maintaining inclusive environments for all students. The importance of this demonstration resides within the idea that different learning abilities should be supported within the classroom by both teachers and students.

Inclusivity within the school systems is a phenomenon that is not new but is constantly in a state of flux. The fact that professionals within the field are constantly adding and updating research in regards to this topic proves that inclusivity is a progressive issue within the field of education.

The main focus of this research will look at strategies that teachers can utilize, or already do use within the classroom to promote social inclusion. There is already a significant and substantive amount of recent research that is also available through articles, books, journals, and research studies.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways that teachers currently support social relations between students with learning disabilities and their community. Statistics show that there are considerable number of students who are identified as exceptional and even more students who are being provided with special education programs and services. As a result, the social ties and connections that these students form and maintain within their classroom have a
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

profound effect on their academic success. A second purpose of this study is to provide teachers, and other educational professionals, with methods and strategies that they can use to strengthen these ties. The intention is that these relationships will offer a boost in the exceptional student’s confidence, which will hopefully be reflected in their studies. Finally, this study will analyze the various strategies and methods that are already being used within the classroom to support and maintain a successful educational standing with regard to students with learning disabilities.

Research Questions

This research project’s aim is to help gain a better understanding of how teachers currently support students in developing positive social relationships within their school community, and how teachers view the impact of these relationships on school success. The particular focus is on students who suffer from a learning disability. The research also demonstrates the current strategies that are used to help students with learning disabilities in regards to their academics.

Alongside this, I have analyzed which strategies are constructive, in the sense that they benefit the student, and which strategies needed to demonstrate more of an inclusive or holistic approach. The following questions guided my research study and data collection: How do teachers support students with learning disabilities and their peer-to-peer relationships within integrative classrooms? A list of sub-questions has been constructed in order to gain maximum information on the topic. These are as follows: What tactics or strategies do teachers use to help maintain a sense of social inclusivity for students with disabilities? How can teachers strengthen peer-to-peer relationships between students with learning disabilities and students who do not have a learning disability? What challenges do teachers face when working with students with disabilities in integrative classrooms?
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

**Background of the Researcher**

There are several experiences that I have undergone which helped create the basis for my research topic. During my high school years I witnessed a great divide between students with learning disabilities and students without a learning disability. As a student who did not receive a diagnosis of having a learning exceptionality or disability it saddened me to see how students who did have exceptionalities were treated. Some of the treatment I observed involved divisive measures such as: constantly moving these students to different classrooms; bringing in other students into the classroom to sit and assist these students, as well as most special education students not being able to take part in many student-based activities.

A second experience that encouraged me to choose this research topic took place during my first practicum in the Master of Teaching program. In the grade one classroom that I was placed in there were many students who were labeled as English language learners. These students were removed from the classroom at different points throughout the day to take part in ESL programming that was done outside of the classroom. I was able to observe the profound effects that this removal imposed on the students. Not only would the returning students come back to the classroom with more work to catch up on, but I began to see how this coming and going made them feel both overwhelmed and inadequate. As a result the students would show signs of being unmotivated and would often end up not using their time wisely. In some cases I would see behavioral problems emerge. There was a clear social divide between the students who left the class and the students who remained in the class. This divide ignited my interest in the social relationships that exist within a classroom.
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

Overview

Chapter 1 includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as how I came to be involved in this topic and study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and procedure that will be used in the study including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. Chapter four will outline my findings that are categorized under the following themes; classroom diversity, classroom strategies, practices held outside of the classroom, and finally defining the obstacles. I will discuss the findings from my own research while making connections to previous research that has been done on this topic. Finally, Chapter 5 will provide an in-depth discussion of my findings as well as further implications and recommendations for teacher professionals. Further questions and concerns will be brought forth in this chapter as well as any limitations that I was subject to as a researcher. References and a list of appendixes follow at the end.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher Collaboration

In the study *Educators’ Perceptions of Collaborative Planning Process for Students with Disabilities*, “collaboration in education is generally defined as co-equal professionals’ voluntarily co-planning to achieve common goals. Teachers who collaborate effectively share resources and decision-making responsibility” (Carter et al., 2009, p. 60). This research study examines the benefits and drawbacks in teacher collaboration as it relates to academic planning for special education students. This study introduces many themes that are important when planning academically for students with learning exceptionalities. It examines six pairs of teachers, comprised of one special education teacher and one general education teacher in each set. These teachers are expected to work collaboratively when planning for special education students.

The teachers who participated in the study used a structured framework that guided them through the necessary steps and provided planning support in terms of what they would do together. The title of the framework that they used is called CRIME and involves the following steps: a) evaluate the curriculum, rules, instruction, materials, and environment of the general education classroom; b) list the student’s learning and behavior strengths and limitations; c) compare the classroom environment with the student’s profile to identify learning facilitators and barriers; and d) plan adaptations and accommodations that will facilitate learning and mitigate the effects of learning barriers (Carter et al., 2009, p. 61).

The majority of teachers who participated in this study agreed that certain factors hindered the collaborative process. Some teachers found that difference in teaching philosophies, time, and different perspectives regarding the student made it difficult for the teachers to
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

collaborate. However, upon completion of the study the majority of participants stated that the overall process was beneficial in terms of interacting with the other teachers and of focusing on the educational needs of their students (Carter et al., 2009, p. 66).

Teacher collaboration is a theme that I would like to touch upon because I have witnessed some of the negative outcomes that can be generated by teachers who demonstrate a lack of communication and collaboration. Additionally, in terms of inclusivity and special education, there is not a substantive amount of information on special education and general education collaboration which is why I think it is very important to ensure that these issues are further explored.

**Peer-to-Peer Strategies**

A student’s first thoughts regarding inclusivity will vary depending on their social setting and personal background. For example, a student who is not identified as an exceptional learner may think being inclusive is sharing with other students. In other instances, an exceptional learner may believe that being inclusive means being able to partake in class discussions without fear of getting made fun of. Overall all professionals in the teaching profession should be aware that there are strategies and steps that they can take in order to develop and maintain community within their classrooms. The study, ‘TALK IN THE CLASSROOM Meeting the Developmental, Academic, and Cultural Needs of Middle School Students’ by Penny B. Howell et al. (2011) discusses a strategy termed ‘accountable talk’ that helps to encourage mutual respect within a diverse classroom. ‘Accountable talk’ is rooted in the social constructivist theory that provides a rational for “discourse-intensive pedagogical practices that combine rigorous tasks with carefully orchestrated, teacher led, discussion” (Howell et al., 2011, p. 48).
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

‘Accountable talk’ was first implemented in a social studies class that consisted of a total of 128 grade eight students. Students reported that ‘accountable talk’ helped them relate and understand social studies because of the fact that they were able to link the content to their lived experiences (Howell et al., 2011, p. 53). The data suggested that ‘accountable talk’ helped meet the social and developmental needs of students with exceptionalities. This study stated that the students felt a sense of belonging and felt socially safe to voice their opinions in a meaningful and constructive way. I believe that by enabling community building within the classroom you are allowing students with learning disabilities to feel comfortable which in turn can allow them to become more vulnerable and open themselves up both academically and socially.

Chrissie Rogers (2007) who wrote, ‘Experiencing an ‘Inclusive’ Education: Parents and Their Children with Special Educational Needs’, argues in opposition to the previous article discussed. Rogers (2007) discusses problems that arose when parents explored or chose to integrate their children within a ‘mainstream’ school system. One of the participants states that there was an issue with exclusion within and from the mainstream school that she had been affiliated with. These participants thought that it was not appropriate for a child to be educated alongside those who are so different (Rogers, 2007, p. 62). The researcher argues that education should not solely be based on inclusion but should focus on appropriate education for all children.

Although both articles promote valid points I believe that Chrissie Rogers’ study is subject to some limitations which may have hindered her final outcome. Rogers’ (2007) findings were based solely on the experience of a limited number of parents that she had interviewed in England. In my research I intend to explore the advantages that peer-to-peer relations and strategies have to offer. I am aware that there will always be challenges that arise between
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

students, but I strongly believe that school climate and classroom management can assist in eliminating these issues.

It is also important to note that a student’s self-perception plays a major role in the peer relationships that he or she may form within the school. Jaana Juvonen and George Bear (1992) who conducted the study, ‘Social Adjustment of Children With and Without Learning Disabilities in Integrated Classrooms’, discuss the implications of self-perception of social acceptance and how this influences peer relationships within the classroom. The authors provide an example from Kristner and Osborne and Stone and LaGreca (1992) who found that “children with learning disabilities tend to have less favourable self-perceptions of social acceptance than children without learning disabilities” (Juvonen and Bear, 1992, pg. 323). Due to the fact that this research is solely based on the strategies that are implemented within integrative classrooms, it is pertinent to educators so that they are able to see the benefits that general education classrooms offer to students with learning disabilities.

The article, ‘Fitting In: Tips for Promoting Acceptance and Friendships for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Inclusive Classrooms’, by Amanda Boutot (2007) discusses the various strategies that teachers can adopt when trying to cater to the needs of different types of learners. Despite the fact that this article focuses on students with Autism Spectrum disorder, it tends to talk a lot about the importance of peer relationships and the significance of social inclusion. Boutot (2007) states in her article that, “research into the social acceptance of children with disabilities has consistently shown that students with disabilities are not as well accepted by their typical peers as are those without disabilities” (Bender, Wyne, Struck, & Bailey; Sabornie & Kauffman, 1987)” (Boutot, 2007, pg. 157).
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

**Teacher-to-Peer Strategies**

The article *Fitting In: Tips for Promoting Acceptance and Friendships for Students with ASDs in Inclusive Classrooms* by Amanda Boutot, 2007, presents many ways that teachers can develop steps and strategies in the classroom to develop and maintain inclusivity. As Boutot’s (2007) article states, “inclusive classrooms are one place where friendships between children with and without disabilities have the opportunity to develop and grow” (Boutot, 2007, p. 158). Boutot (2007) discusses the various practices that teachers can implement to help maintain a sense of community and to assist students in creating friendships within the classroom. Boutot (2007) introduces a list of things that teachers can do to help carefully and thoughtfully plan out an inclusive classroom. They are as follows: 1) select the classroom wisely; 2) schedule wisely; 3) select supports wisely; 4) prepare the classroom teacher; 5) prepare the general education students; 6) prepare the student with ASD, and; 7) secure and maintain family support. This article suggests a strong possibility of success because of the fact that it demonstrates a step-by-step process that encourages the teacher to take control and develop not only a solid regime but a stable relationship with his or her students.

I also found that this article was relevant to my research because it has a sound base of actions that appear to be both honest and sincere. I am very keen on the idea of the teacher involving the students in community building process by acknowledging and then removing the ‘elephant in the room’. I found this article to be a positive contribution to my research because it allowed me to draw on some practices and plans that I could explore during my practicum.

An additional study which also illustrates strong teacher-to-peer relations is ‘Behavior Management in Inclusive Classrooms’ by Stephanie Carpenter and Elizabeth McKee-Higgins (1996). This study explores proactive behavior management programs that are an effective
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

means of responding to diverse behavioural characteristics (Carpenter & McKee-Higgins, 1996, p. 195). The article discusses the effectiveness of teachers knowing their students’ behavioural issues and then implementing procedures that take these behavioural issues into consideration. One illustration used the example of verbal praise and discussed how this might not always be a powerful reinforcement for every student. In cases similar to this they suggest that the teacher should seek a more tangible re-enforcer which they can then slowly wean the student off of over a period of time. Ultimately, the ability to be able to treat and manage diverse behavioural issues according to student’s needs is essential for maintaining inclusivity and fairness.

**Social Inclusion & Transparency**

Like the article by Amanda Boutot, who discusses the idea of teachers confronting their class with the realities of students with special needs, the study, ‘*Making the Social Visible Within Inclusive Classrooms*’ by Laurie Katz and Jeanne Galbraith introduces similar protocols. The authors of this study discuss how social inclusion has become lost, or forgotten, in the classroom. The study discusses how segregation can hinder peer contact and affect a child’s opportunity to have positive peer role models (Katz & Galbraith, 2006). Segregation within the classroom can definitely create a disconnect amongst peers as well as between peers and the school community. This article implies that teachers who face learning exceptionalities with an open mind, and then alter classroom regimens’ to carry out their goals, have the ability to create an open and safe community. One of the major achievements of this study derived from the fact that it revealed that children from the ages of three to five years old were already aware of other students learning exceptionalities. These young students were expected to respond and deliver content in a positive way. It was interesting to see that students without exceptionalities would even go as far as using hand gestures to communicate if they needed to.
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

This study is a good illustration of the fact that parents and teachers do not have to conceal or hide the fact that students need accommodations and/or modifications within the classroom. I believe that material that deals with transparency and special education within the classroom gives all students agency and prepares them for real world experiences.

The article, ‘Looking through the learning disability lens: inclusive education and the learning disability embodiment’, by Athena Goodfellow (2012) measures the ways in which the geographical set up of a classroom and school inhibit both social inclusion and exclusion. These measures were investigated through the perspective of the students with learning disabilities. This study conducts focus groups with elementary students who are part of special education programs within their school. The students who participated in the study were asked to go around the school and take pictures of art work and then provide some reasoning behind why they chose that caption and what it meant to them. One of the students chose a picture of the word ‘imagine’ that is hung up on one of the walls within the school. When asked why he chose that caption, the student replied with the following answer, “Because a lot of people don’t like the world they’re in because they are being made fun of and so they imagine a new world to be in” (Goodfellow, 2012, pg. 71).

This article introduces the importance of perspective and the impact that school messages may have on their students with learning disabilities in terms of their social experience. Although the piece of art work was not meant to activate negative emotion from any of the students, it did because of the social position that this student held within his school.

The article, ‘Outcomes for Students with Learning Disabilities in Inclusive and Pullout Programs’, by Rea et al. discusses current research that has been conducted on the effectiveness of pull out programs and integrative classrooms. The study states that the research has been
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

limited in terms of measuring academic and social outcomes in regards to the ‘pull out’ method. However, they do suggest a positive trend when students are integrated within general education classrooms. This study tested a group of middle school students for school attendance, student performance and basic skills test scores. One of the findings that are pertinent to my specific research are the results based on school attendance. The study states, “Attendance data from both schools revealed that students in inclusive classrooms attended significantly more days of school than did students in pull out special education programs” (Rea et al., 2002, pg. 216).
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Procedure

My research methodology required me to gather relevant data from previous research and educational resources that addressed the topic of inclusive education and students who have a learning disability. This was done through the compilation of relevant research that was analyzed and articulated through the lens of the researcher. This project is a qualitative research that addresses a variety of aspects that will support both my research question and sub-questions. I have investigated the strategies that are used within schools today in regards to building inclusive education. Ultimately, my research has discovered both new and preexisting information and strategies that have assisted me in developing conclusions on positive strategies that help with the social inclusion of students with learning disabilities.

In this research, I examined relevant literature to help guide my theoretical processes which has also furthered my knowledge base and information related to my topic. I have compiled the relevant information into a literature review in order to draw out data that is pertinent to my study. Following this, I conducted face-to-face interviews with a total of two teachers. These interviews have helped me to gain an understanding of practices and regimes that are used within school systems today as well as the personal opinions of professionals that are embedded within educational institutions. Participant observation has also been a vital part of my research as I have observed practices that are taking place within the school system. This portion will be done during my practicum. During my placements I documented anecdotal notes, in the form of a research journal, on any pertinent observations and included any information that I think is noteworthy and relevant to my research. After I revisited the information and analyzed my findings I drew conclusions which pertain to my research questions.
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

**Instruments of Data Collection:**

The main instrument of data collection was collected through the use of informal interviews along with secondary data analysis. Turner states in her article ‘Qualitative Interview Design: A Practical Guide for Novice Investigators’, that, “often times, interviews are coupled with other forms of data collection in order to provide the researcher with a well-rounded collection of information for analyses” (Turner, p.754). Standardized open-ended interviews have also been utilized within my research study. This was the most efficient way to collect the appropriate data that my study required while also allowing the interviewee to offer me any other information that may be beneficial to my findings. A series of fifteen questions were asked over a span of approximately thirty minutes. The answers were open-ended in the sense that interviewees were encouraged to fully reflect on the question and provide answers that reflected their own opinion and experiences. Also, follow-up questions did arise in the midst of the interview, and as the interviewer I took full advantage of the opportunity and explored the nature of those questions. See a list of interview questions in Appendix A.

**Participants**

Both interviews were conducted with teachers who were invited to participate in the study. The criterion that had to be met for selection is as follows: interviewees are registered teachers by the Ontario College of Teachers. The teachers also encompass a significant amount of experience with students with learning exceptionalities (minimum of three years). The teachers also have a keen interest in developing and maintaining inclusivity within the classroom. The above-mentioned criteria was pertinent to the study for a variety of reasons. First, as a researcher, I only had an interest in collecting information that is both accurate and transpired from true events. This would be information that only a professional, such as a teacher
could offer. Second, due to the fact that my research study focuses on progressive inclusive learning environments and ways to improve them it was beneficial that my interviewees had a particular interest in inclusive education or that they are known to be exemplary teachers in this regard, and therefore share the same lens as the researcher.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The data sources include observation as well as interviews. Data was recorded through notes that I made throughout the duration of the interviews as well as any notes that I included immediately after the interview was completed. Following the completion of the interviews, I transcribed my data for the purpose of analysis. These transcriptions were performed by first reading and then rereading the actual interview data. I focused on those points in the interview data where the interviewee discusses strategies that they have implemented to build social inclusion. I also focused on those portions of the data where the interviewee mentions students with learning exceptionalities and difficulties that they’ve observed. I focused in on the signs that teachers can recall of how students become motivated or de-motivated. Lastly, I will pay specific attention to the issues and obstacles that teachers face in regards to the social and academic success of their students with learning disabilities. Following the interview process, I had several themes submerge from the data collected. The data represented in the following study also coincides with the previous research that has been conducted on this topic. The following themes have submerged from the data and will be discussed in further detail in the chapters to come; peer-to-peer relationships, classroom strategies, practices outside of the classroom, and obstacles.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

In order to ensure that ethical practices were followed and maintained throughout the duration of the research there are various procedures and actions that were taken in order to
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

maintain the security and trust of the participants. For the interview process, a letter of consent was signed by each interviewee. The letter identifies the conditions of the interview which were also explained in great detail. This ensured that the contents of the interview are solely for the purpose of this assignment (See appendix B for the copy of consent letter). Prior to signing, I made sure that the interviewees were aware that they could withdraw from the study at any point in time. Interviewees were also informed that they have the right to examine the information once it has been transcribed. Finally, the participants were assured that their names and/or any other identifiers will be held completely anonymous.

As the researcher it is my duty to approach participants with the utmost respect and dignity. Therefore, I asked for their permission to conduct an interview with them by displaying both courtesy and clarity of intent as well as revealing the nature of my study. Participants were assured that all raw data will be filed in my personal computer which is protected by a password. As the researcher I made sure not to withhold reasonable information if requested by the participant. I endeavored to ensure that the participants felt comfortable and at ease in supplying me with the information that I needed to conduct my research.

Limitations

This Masters of Teaching Research Project on teaching strategies that demonstrate social inclusion for students with learning disabilities is one of many studies that will be conducted on this topic. Therefore, the data collected during the duration of this study is more prone to producing replicated data. Another limitation is related to the amount of time that is allotted to conduct this research. If there was considerably more time allotted more data would have the potential of being explored and this additional data could be used to further verify the research findings.
Another limitation is that the number of participants who were interviewed during the duration of this study was limited to two. It is an obvious limitation in that if I was given more time and the ability to conduct additional interviews with other professionals within the field such as principals, librarians, and special education teachers that this would further the findings of my research and provide me with a broader and more comprehensive amount of data to work with. As the researcher it was my responsibility to conduct the research and to collect data for the purpose of my research while keeping the imposed limitations in mind.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Findings are organized around the research questions and presented through the various themes that were extracted from the interviews (see appendix B). First, I will discuss the reality of diverse classrooms that exist today within Ontario and connect it to the Ministry of Education’s strategy and guidelines (2009). Next, I will discuss how peer-to-peer relationships can foster community building and mutual respect between students who have a learning disability and the students who do not have a learning disability. Next, I will discuss how the implementation of various instructional strategies, classroom management, and differentiated instruction can help heighten the social experience for students who have a learning disability.

Practices that are held outside of the classroom also act as a great contributor to the development and maintenance of social inclusion for these students. Programs and activities of this nature will be discussed in further detail.

Finally, I will explore the various obstacles that staff and students experience in regards to maintaining a socially inclusive environment for students with a learning disability.

The Diverse Classroom

Connecting the Ministry of Education’s ‘Inclusive Guide to Education to the Classroom’

The Ministry of Education’s Equity Act (2009) has published documents that outline the various strategies and guidelines that Ontario teachers are expected to use and follow in order to maintain and foster an inclusive learning environment for their students. The government has carefully sought out a well-designed strategy that reflects the reality of the student demographic that is prevalent within our schools today. The document displays the importance of community building within our province. This document also makes direct reference to the Ontario Human
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

Rights Code which guarantees a citizen’s right to freedom of discrimination in relation to their race, sex, sexual orientation, age, and abilities etc. The Ontario Ministry of Education’s ‘Inclusive Guide to Education’ (2009) states that, “equity and inclusive education identifies and eliminates barriers and meets individual needs” (Ministry of Education, 2009, pg.3). Participants were asked how they think these guidelines help to reinforce social inclusion within their classroom.

Mary Brown is a special education teacher with twenty two years teaching experience. Brown has taught within general education classes as well as special education classes. Mrs. Brown states that, “these guidelines help to reinforce inclusion because they respect that there is a full range of differences in the classroom, and that the big thing is diversity”.

Steven Howell currently teaches an integrated grade five classroom and has 13 years of experience. He too sees the issues with the students in regards to their learning disabilities and their place within the classroom. Howell states, “an issue that is evident this year with a couple of my students is they are really concerned of how other people perceive them and whether they perceive them as just being different, not necessarily as not smart.” Although the participants’ made different connections to the Ministry of Education’s Equity Inclusive Guide (2009), they both supported the notion that diverse classrooms are a reality within Ontario school systems today. It is seen through Howell’s current experience that these equitable guidelines that are set out by the Ministry are not necessarily represented through the eyes of the students.

Chrissie Rogers (2007), who conducted a study on the experiences of parents who have children with special needs and are integrated within general education classrooms, also comments on the difficulties that students experience in regards to inclusion within integrated classrooms. Rogers (2007) highlights that “‘inclusive’ education policy, as a concept, process
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

and an experienced reality, *denies* difficulty rather than embraces it” (Rogers, 2007, p. 56). After examination of the Ministry’s guide, and as you will see in the findings, ‘inclusive’ education is not something that is regularly implemented within Ontario schools, and if it is, it not always reflected through the eyes of those students with learning disabilities. As it appears, the government’s expectations of an inclusive classroom are not an actual reflection of what is currently happening in our classrooms today. As previous research and information continues to be brought to the forefront it becomes apparent that strong teaching practices and inclusive strategies are not always implemented. However, when these strategies are implemented it heightens the social experience of students who have a learning disability, thus, resulting in a more inclusive environment for students with learning disabilities.

**Peer-to-Peer Relationships**

*Community and mutual respect between peers are imperative for the building and maintaining of strong peer-to-peer relationships within an integrative classroom.*

Another factor that plays a major role in the social experience for students who have a learning disability is his or her relationships with peers. Peer relationships were a reoccurring theme that was mentioned by both participants throughout both interviews and also while reviewing previous research. While many students who have a learning disability may face some difficulties when trying to develop and maintain positive relationships with his or her peers, a lot can be done by the teacher in order to support and build these relationships. After reviewing the compiled research, it was clear that many teachers take partial responsibility for the relationships that are formed between his or her students.

Both teachers interviewed noted several tactics and strategies that they implement within the classroom in order to develop and maintain community within their classrooms and schools. To enhance on the relationships that are maintained between the students, both teachers have
also made reference to the fact that the students have become accustomed to one another. Brown notes during several points of the interview that most students within the integrative classrooms have developed strong social ties within the classroom and that their academic and physical abilities do not play a part in the relationships that are formed. Brown states, “The kids are so used to those students being in the room that there isn’t any issues in terms of the other students”.

This notion of students being accustomed to one another is something that arose during both interviews. Steven Howell, who teaches a grade five integrative class, discusses the level of comfort that his students express in regards to the students in the class who have been identified with a learning disability. Howell states, “they become used to it and the other students become used to it as well. They just know that the student is going to be withdrawn from that test, they are going to get extra help for that test.”

Both interviewees described their school as a place where the students have been placed in the same classrooms with the same students year after year. Both teachers mention that their students have become accustomed to the students that are identified and have grown to accept them over time. This is seen as beneficial because it allows the students with learning disabilities to feel a sense of community and belonging with their peers. However, it is important to note that these relationships may have only developed as a result of habit as opposed to the implementation of inclusion strategies and tactics.

The idea of having students of all academic and social abilities co-exist in a classroom, while accepting and learning from one another, is the underlying foundation for developing positive social relationships. A study, ‘Talk in the Classroom: Meeting the Developmental, Academic, and Cultural Needs of Middle School Students’ by Howell et al. (2011) whose study
on ‘accountable talk’ was guided by a social constructivist theory discusses the importance and the impact that student interaction carries.

Howell et al. (2011) makes reference to the social constructivist theory in his study, he states:

“This social constructivist theory implies that ‘knowledge is the co-constructed through the constant, triangular relationship among (a) new content, (b) students’ ideas about experiences of that content, and (c) interaction among students’” (Howell et al., 2011, pg. 50).

The interaction that students with learning disabilities experience with their peers has the power to affect how well they receive academic content. The social constructivist theory basically implies that if these students feel at ease and comfortable with their peers then it is likely that their social and academic experiences within the classroom will reflect positive outcomes. Regardless of whether students grow to accept each other, there needs to be greater emphasis put on the strategies that teachers implement directly within their classroom in order to aid positive social experiences.

In my own experiences, within a grade 6 integrative classroom, I observed unsatisfactory community building practices which resulted in little to no mutual respect amongst the students with and without learning disabilities. The students who were identified with a learning disability sat at a table, placed at the back of a room, with the assistance of a support teacher and it became obvious that they were socially segregated from the rest of the class. Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (1979) also implies that it is a possibility that the lack of social communication between these students and their peers could have hindered their academic experience within the class as well. Furthermore, despite the fact that all the students were members of the same class, their academic capabilities and the environmental set up of the classroom prohibited them from being socially integrated with the rest of their peers.
As previously mentioned, both interviewees stated that there is a high level of social inclusion that is demonstrated within their classrooms and schools. Therefore, the information that I was able to gather regarding strategies that teachers initially implement in order to foster strong relationships within the classroom is limited because these relationships already existed. However, both teachers seemed supportive and encouraging of the peer-to-peer relationships within their classrooms. Brown closes her interview by stating that:

“I guess the last thing would be how important it is to build awareness. That inclusion I truly believe is truly the best thing for our students for whatever their need is. That socially they need to be with their peers and that they need to feel accepted. In terms of their self-confidence and self-esteem, if you separate them then you are not helping them build that or helping them build their relationships.”

Brown expressed a true passion and a strong belief for inclusive strategies for students with learning disabilities. She expanded on the various strategies and methods that the staff and herself implement in order to strengthen these peer-to-peer ties within the school. However, during the period of my own observations that were incurred over the course of this study, it was clear that an emphasis on community and mutual respect was lacking and therefore resulted in less social cohesion between all students.

**Teacher-to-Peer Strategies**

*Instructional strategies that are regularly implemented can help maintain social inclusivity for students with a learning disability.*

Throughout the process of both interviews and through my own observations it is clear that instructional strategies can make a difference in the way a student experiences his or her classroom. The way a teacher facilitates and delivers content to his or her students can impact their social experience. For instance, if a teacher within an integrative classroom consistently groups students according to their academic abilities, then they are also limiting the opportunities for their students to learn from one another.
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

According to Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (1978) there are two developmental levels that students perform at, they are; (a) the actual level that a student can perform at on his or her own and (b) the level a student can perform at with guidance or assistance (Scott (2009). This being said, one of the ways that teachers are able to extend their student’s learning while also making them feel socially included would be how they facilitate group work within their classrooms. Brown was asked to comment on the various strategies that she finds effective within her classroom. Brown states:

“We try to look at tiered center groups. We try to eliminate biases and barriers. Co-operative learning is also huge. You do a tiered group, so you got different kids at different levels in a group and they all have their own responsibility in a group to complete a task, and there isn’t a high or low group.”

Brown discusses other strategies that she finds effective for her students with learning disabilities such as; the inquiry based model, modeling the learning, and looking at the needs and interests of all her students.

The use of accommodations and modifications is an expectation that teachers are expected to implement for the students that require them, this includes students with learning disabilities. When Howell was asked to discuss the ways in which he altered the way he maintained an inclusive learning experience for his students he responded with an experience that he had gone through where he had to physically alter a summative test in order for the student to complete it. Howell goes on to explain that this particular student, who happened to be a gifted student with a learning disability, had a difficult time processing the ‘bigger’ picture. Howell also mentions how it is important for a teacher to be flexible with their accommodations and modifications stating that the tactic he used with his gifted student who had a learning disability may not have worked with all students with the same issue.
Brown expresses similar views in terms of implementing accommodations and modifications. Her views on accommodations and modifications were very holistic in nature. Brown stated in the interview that,

“The accommodations that we put in place is just good teaching, and whether a child is identified LD or not, every child learns differently. We are all together, whatever doesn’t work we will find a way to make it work. So, I don’t find having an LD student in my room changes anything about the environment for the students.”

Both teachers have mentioned the importance of adapting their teaching to the learning styles of their students. It is important to note that it is possible that students with the same learning disabilities may require different accommodations in regards to academic content or making social connections with his or her peers. Therefore, as both interviewees mentioned, it is important to be flexible in your adaptations and to always be ready and open to make appropriate accommodations and modifications when and if necessary. Another strategy that was mentioned by both participants was group work. Facilitating group work is another way that a teacher is able to create open and positive relationships within the classroom.

*Consistent classroom and behavior management has the ability to set social expectations for all students which inevitably can benefit students with learning disabilities.*

Classroom management is another way that teachers can maintain social inclusivity for all of their students. If a teacher sets a precedent and consistently models that expectation it is likely that his or her students will follow suit. Howell discusses how he uses classroom management to remind the students of the importance of different abilities and that not everyone is one in the same. Howell states,

“How I try to bridge that gap with students is by saying “Okay, well I am different because I do this, you know what I mean? And you are different because you do this.” I point out peoples differences and publicize those so that they see that so many people are different and they are not so conscious of their differences.”
Howell also seemed very adamant on enforcing a ‘zero tolerance policy’ in regards to excluding other students at the beginning of the year. Howell states that he always makes a point to relay the rules of the classroom to his students in regards to accepting others and being respectful regardless of their differences and or similarities.

An additional study which also looks at the effectiveness of behavior management when trying to maintain a socially inclusive environment was conducted by Stephanie Carpenter and Elizabeth McKee-Higgins (1996). The authors of the journal, ‘Behaviour Management in Inclusive Classrooms’, discuss the importance of proactive behavior management programs and make specific relations to managing students with learning disabilities. The creation and maintenance of a positive class climate was one of the main themes that the authors measured. In order for a positive classroom climate to function they note that there are five components that directly influence and address the positive class climate. Carpenter and McKee-Higgins state,

“**Consistent classroom schedule and structure in which rules, expectations, consequences, and routines are clearly communicated to students and consistently followed by the teacher. Students may be involved in developing classroom procedures. The teacher should maintain positive focus by emphasizing desired behaviors and their consequences**” (Carpenter & McKee-Higgins (1996), pg. 195).

Brown discusses how her experiences with managing behaviour was to act as more of a guide for her students. Brown recognizes and appreciates the fact that students with learning disabilities may experience social difficulties, especially in terms of communication. Brown elaborated on an example of an experience that ended up in a minor dispute between two students. This particular dispute was caused by a lack of communication that resulted in a student becoming upset. Brown comments on the role of the teacher when these conflicts arise. She talks about the importance of being a facilitator as opposed to ‘taking over’ the situation. Brown states, “We asked the student ‘what is your role here?’ So at that point the other kids realized
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

that maybe they didn’t quite tell him what they wanted him to do and it was something very simple. I felt I was more there to facilitate.”

The teacher-to-peer strategies that both interviewees mentioned such as instructional strategies, accommodations and modifications and behaviour management strategies can help facilitate a socially inclusive learning environment when appropriately implemented.

Practices Outside of the Classroom

Extra-curricular activities and school initiatives that promote community help students with learning disabilities connect with their peers while also enhancing their own social experiences within the school.

As most of us are aware, building strong social connections between peers is not limited to the four walls of a classroom. There are many activities, programs, and events that are held outside of the classroom that play a significant role on a student’s social experience within the school. Brown discusses the various activities and programs that her school holds in order to develop strong community between all students regardless of their abilities. Brown states,

“I do a lot of stuff outside of the school, and those kids are included as much as possible. Sometimes it’s harder depending on the need and if it’s a sport or something it can be harder. But, even if they can’t be on the team in terms of playing, they can help in other ways be part of that, so we do promote that.”

Brown goes on to state that most teachers within the school have completed TRIBES which assists with inclusion and integration. TRIBES is a hands-on professional development course that prepares teaching staff how to utilize cooperative learning strategies that promotes community, collaboration, and social development.

Brown shared how one of her students with Down syndrome is a door monitor for the school. This demonstrates that the distribution of school responsibilities is not limited to only students who may perform at an ‘average’ level, that all students are considered within this particular school.
Brown also talked about the clubs that are offered at a regional level such as the Boys and Girls club. The school is responsible for picking ten to twelve students to participate in this club that runs at lunch time. Brown states that they always make sure to include the students with learning disabilities. Another program that is offered at this school is the milk program. Students within the special education program are responsible for running this program throughout the school. The milk program is affiliated with a life skills initiative that the school holds all year round. It is clear through Brown’s descriptive feedback on inclusion strategies outside of the classroom that students with learning disabilities are not overlooked in any way. This particular school’s diverse student population is what helps to define the school and the social relations that grow within it.

Howell was also asked to comment on the various practices that are held outside of the classroom. Howell made specific reference to the character development and recognition assemblies that are facilitated once a month. Howell states, “Students are recognized on the 12 character traits that the board finds to be paramount in a child’s development. So, they are all included and participate in those types of things.” School wide initiatives that are implemented by the board are a way that Howell believes his students with learning disabilities are socially included outside of the classroom. However, no other mention was made about other programs, activities, or strategies outside of the classroom.

With the assistance from teachers, administrators and support staff, students with learning disabilities are consistently supported through their social experiences in and outside of school.

Practices outside of the classroom are not limited to school wide activities and programs that take place. Staff officials and support workers who do not work directly inside integrated classrooms also assist students with learning disabilities on a regular basis. A range of staff
members outside of the classroom help students who have learning disabilities attain a more positive social experience.

Whether it be to assist with their academics or home life there are numerous individuals involved in the lives of these students which all have an effect on their overall well-being. Brown told me about some of the support workers that are currently present within the school. Brown mentions the youth worker at her school who is very involved with the social aspect of the student’s experience within the school. She states that, “The social worker is really good at helping to connect parents and families.”

It is essential that teachers are aware of the outside supports that do exist within their schools so that they are able to better assist students with learning disabilities in all aspects of their lives. This is also beneficial because if students feel secure within their surroundings then it is likely that their self-esteem will reflect this. A possible positive result of this would be that their chances of developing strong social ties within their school community will heighten.

**Obstacles**

*Without the efforts and involvement of all staff, building a socially inclusive environment for students with learning disabilities can be difficult to maintain.*

The on-going collaboration between teachers and staff offers many benefits in regards to enhancing the social experiences of students with learning disabilities. The ideas that surround social inclusion for our students with disabilities require the efforts of all staff and students combined. However, it is an unfortunate reality that this is not always the case within schools. Carter et al. (2006), who wrote, ‘Educators Perceptions of Collaborative Planning Process for Students with states that, “collaboration is a critical aspect of effective inclusion. When schools adopt specific procedures or models for collaboration, students with disabilities benefit from teachers collaborative planning.” The same study also states that, “When teachers fail to
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

collaborate to plan supports for students with disabilities, general education teachers may not individualize adaptations and accommodations to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities who are in their classes.” (Carter et al., 2006, p.

Collaboration is critical to the academic and social success of students with learning disabilities on a variety of spectrums. However, it is important to note the obstacles that teachers face when there is a lack of teacher collaboration in relation to students with learning disabilities. As a SERT teacher, Brown believes that her biggest obstacle in relation to maintaining a socially inclusive environment for her students is in relation to teacher collaboration. Brown states,

“The biggest obstacle I’ve encountered as a SERT teacher is making sure everyone is on board in terms of staff. Like the board has policies included and that’s great. But, to get everyone on board and to accept the student’s needs, that is probably the biggest thing. I find that sometimes teachers get overwhelmed with their program alone that they just don’t know what to do with them and sometimes it’s hard.”

Brown who has had an ample amount of experience within her field also notes the benefits of teacher collaboration. Brown states,

“Once they learn the strategies and develop the I.E.P with you and implement those things I find that then they are okay. They find out it’s not that hard to modify, it’s not that hard to meet their needs...It can be a little frustrating at times because they think it’s sometimes easier for them to have them out.”

As stated, teacher collaboration can assist the students with social and academic growth. Teacher collaboration can also assist the teacher in becoming more comfortable with supplying the student with the proper programming.

Brown also brings up the issues that surround teacher discomfort in regards to supplying students with the appropriate programming and the implementation of accommodations and modifications. Brown states, “Teachers might end up with a split class and have four LD students and they are thinking, “What do I do with these students?” And for them quite honestly, it would be easier if I took them out and worked with them.” Brown discussed how this state of
discomfort is especially common for new teachers within the school. Planned team collaboration and allotting time to construct differentiated tasks and lessons can ultimately allow more time within integrative classrooms for students with disabilities.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research project was to investigate strategies and tactics that teachers and staff use to help foster a socially inclusive learning environment for students with learning disabilities. The participants who volunteered their time to partake in the interviews along with the previous research have allowed me to develop a greater sense of current strategies that are presently being used within Ontario schools. The research that I have conducted over the span of two years has assisted me in drawing conclusions on effective strategies that are currently being implemented as well as some strategies that need to be strengthened within the general education classroom.

As a teacher candidate, I have been required to complete practicums where it is my duty to assume the role of the teacher. During these times, I have gained a deeper understanding about the importance of social inclusion between students who have different abilities. As I began to take control over my role as a researcher and teacher candidate, I began to realize that the classroom is a space where students have the ability to form strong social relationships with their peers which can ultimately have a positive effect on their learning experience. As a practicing teacher, I acknowledge the fact that teachers have the ability to inhibit strong teaching practices that help students learn and grow in a supportive environment. I am fully aware of the fact that it is an educator’s duty to consistently utilize strategies that help foster a safe learning environment that displays positivity and acceptance.
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

**The Diverse Classroom**

*Connecting the Ministry of Education’s ‘Inclusive Guide to Education’ (2009) in the Classroom*

*The Ontario’s Ministry of Education’s ‘Inclusive Guide to Education’ (2009) sets forth guidelines for policy development and inclusive implementation within Ontario classrooms. The guide is equipped with strategic practices, work plans and case studies that promote inclusion within the school. It was through my own experiences that I acknowledged the possibility of these practices not being consistently implemented within Ontario schools. It is apparent through the research that inclusion between peers is a priority for teachers. However, the strategies and methods that promote inclusion are not standard across all schools.*

*A study conducted by Athena Goodfellow (2012), ‘Looking through the learning disability lens: inclusive education and the learning disability embodiment’, investigates the ways in which schools demonstrate social inclusion just as much as they demonstrate social exclusion through the perspective of the students with learning disabilities. Goodfellow (2012) implies in her paper that although a school’s initiative is to help develop and foster healthy relationships between all students alike, the geographical set up classrooms could be an inhibiting factor. During my observations, classroom environment and set up were factors that played a major role in the relationships that were formed between students with disabilities and students without disabilities. During one of my experiences, a group of students with learning disabilities were physically segregated. This ultimately resulted in them experiencing aspects of social segregation as well. Goodfellow states,*

“Inclusion can be fostered in the social and educational climate that is created by the educator, which allows students – with and without disabilities – to seek out accommodations that are most suitable for their learning style and, also demonstrate an empathic awareness to the students’ needs” (Goodfellow, 2012, pg. 77).
Brown expresses her knowledge and understanding of the Ministry of Education’s (2009) guidelines, whereas Howell did not make direct connections to the guidelines at all. Ontario’s vision of inclusive education within schools is something that I believe educators should pay more attention to. It should be within the goals of all educators to adopt strategies that promote inclusion which can be found within the Ontario document.

Peer-to-Peer Relationships

*Community and mutual respect between peers are imperative for the building and maintaining of strong peer-to-peer relationships within an integrative classroom.*

The peer-to-peer relationships that are formed between students of different learning abilities plays a major role in how they experience social inclusion within their school. Brown and Howell elaborate on the experiences of their students and how they were able to develop and maintain strong relationships between their students. The participant’s students were able to maintain positive relationships because they were able to get to know one another year after year. That being said, conflict and dispute over learning dissimilarities was kept to a minimum because the students were very much used to one another. I posit, that in other cases not all students will have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with all the students in the school. Therefore, it is important that teachers evaluate preexisting relationships between peers and are sure to implement community building strategies or practices that can help foster peer-to-peer relationships within their classrooms.

The participants’ view on integrative classrooms coincides with Katz and Galbraith’s (2006) study, ‘Making the Social Visible within Inclusive Classrooms’, because they all believe in avoiding the segregation of students. Both participants fully acknowledged the importance of student integration and collaboration. Katz and Gailbraith state, “Segregation and stigmatization may prevent peer contact and, in turn, hinder a child’s opportunity to have positive peer role
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

models in his daily contacts (Katz & Gailbraith, 2006, pg. 6). Allowing the students to communicate, experience, and co-exist in the same classroom is essential for the social growth of students with learning disabilities.

Teacher-to-Peer Strategies

*Instructional strategies that are regularly implemented can help maintain social inclusivity for students with a learning disability.*

Previous studies have suggested that transparency within the classroom is an effective way to build social inclusion amongst peers. Howell (2011) references *Vygostky’s (1978)* theory: (a) tools of the mind and (b) zone of proximal development (ZPD) as a way to see how integration amongst peers is surely beneficial. As previously mentioned, the *zone of proximal development* emphasizes the role of social interactions for cognitive development and argues in favor of student-centered teaching (Howel et al., 2011, pg. 50). The benefits that students with disabilities gain when integrated within general education classrooms are maximal in terms of social cohesion. Students without learning disabilities also learn how to understand and grow compassion for their peers while developing a natural understanding of different learning styles.

Boutot (2007) introduces several strategies that can be utilized within the classroom to help promote social inclusion between all students. Boutot’s (2007) list of strategies and tactics overlaps many of the answers that Mary Brown provided during her interview. Strategies such as transparency, cooperative learning and outside supports were mentioned in Boutot’s study as well as during Brown’s interview.
Consistent classroom and behavior management has the ability to set social expectations for all students which inevitably can benefit students with learning disabilities.

Another highly important strategy that came out during the interview process was classroom management. Howell expressed a deep concern of the importance of establishing classroom rules and expectations around mutual respect. Howell explains how he uses classroom management skills to help him to maintain community and inclusion within his classroom. Carter et al.’s (2006) study on behaviour management in inclusive classrooms also discusses classroom management strategies. This study focuses on the effectiveness of proactive classroom management techniques that help maintain a positive classroom climate. Howell’s classroom management skills tended to characterize more ‘traditional’ management styles opposed to dynamic and responsive interventions. For example, Howell refers to having a ‘zero tolerance policy’ within his classroom but does not provide detail as to how he deals with behaviours once they have occurred. Howell did not include any details on building positive relationships through classroom management.

Howell did state that transparency plays a major role in maintaining strong peer-to-peer relationships within his classroom. He discussed how he always makes a point to bring forth the differences between all his students and how it is okay to be different.

Practices Outside of the Classroom

Extra-curricular activities and school initiatives that promote community help students with learning disabilities connect with their peers while also enhancing their own social experiences within the school.

It is evident that a student’s social experience is not limited to their experiences within the classroom. Brown emphasized the idea of social inclusion within the school at large. School wide initiatives was not something that other studies measured in isolation. For instance, other
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

studies referred to classroom routines and open-ended activities, however school wide initiatives was not seen as a direct variable that influenced peer-to-peer relationships. Brown’s school practices entailed a large variety of activities that helped to develop strong social relationships between peers. In addition, Howell mentions the character development trait assemblies which he thinks helps socially include students with learning disabilities.

With the assistance from teachers, administrators and support staff, students with learning disabilities are consistently supported through their social experiences in and outside of school.

Brown discusses the various support staff and additional staff members who also assist in maintaining a socially inclusive learning environments for students with disabilities. Brown was the only participant who elaborated on the positive outcomes that these staff members bring forth in terms of the social aspect. Brown states, “The social worker is really good for helping connect parents and families with organization that can help parents with children who have an LD. Our resource workers are a great help, they help a lot with the life skills program.” This being said, teachers should not only be aware but be in constant contact with the various staff members who are able to assist students with LD socially adjust within their school community. This is especially important in terms of connecting a student’s home life with their school life so that the parents also feel confident in their child and the connections they are making at school.

Obstacles

Without the efforts and involvement of all staff, building a socially inclusive environment for students with learning disabilities can be difficult to maintain.

The study, ‘Educators’ Perceptions of Collaborative Planning Processes for Students with Disabilities’ by Carter et al. (2006) discusses the importance of planning and communication between a general education teacher and a special education teacher. Carter et al. states,
“when teachers fail to collaborate to plan supports for students with disabilities, general education teachers may not individualize instruction and may not provide the instructional adaptations and accommodations to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities who are in their classes” (Carter et al., 2009, pg. 61).

The above quote describes a mis-communication between teachers which is coincidentally the same type of mis-communication that Brown has experienced within her school. Brown states that many general education teachers are hesitant to collaborate with the special education teachers and would rather plan separately. This lack of communication between the two teachers often results in the general education teacher feeling discouraged and overwhelmed in terms of planning for their students with learning disabilities. It is imperative that all teachers collaborate with their colleagues so that they are able to better assist the students in regards to their academic and social needs.

The onus is often on the special education teacher to assist the student to better fit in socially. Therefore, if a student with a learning disability is feeling socially overwhelmed or excluded it is important that both teachers collaborate in order to better assist the student. It can be assumed that if the special education teacher is the primary teacher that is making an effort to strengthen social ties then it can lead the student to feeling as if he or she cannot turn to his or her general education teacher. This type of relationship can create further barriers between the student and his or her peers.

Implications for Practice

The compiled research in this study supports previous research that has been conducted on the social experience of students with learning disabilities. The various studies that were analyzed for the purpose of this paper examined variables in isolation that had a direct effect on
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

students with learning disabilities and their social experience within integrative classrooms. It is recommended that when educators look at the social experience of their students with learning disabilities, it is essential that we view these experiences through a holistic lens.

As educators it is important that we do not limit our efforts to only the planning process for our students with learning disabilities. It is important to realize that a positive social experience within the school community can and likely will heighten a student’s academic performance.

Collaboration with colleagues, positive classroom management, and community building are all effective strategies that teachers can utilize within their classrooms in order to develop and maintain social inclusivity.

It is vital that teachers also make an effort to feel comfortable with their students with learning disabilities so that they are able to better assist them with their social and academic experiences. As teachers, we need to be able to adapt and assist students with different learning abilities. Educators should allow students to inform their teaching so that they are able to better prepare and cater to their needs. As educators, we need to be willing and ready to create opportunities where students can learn from one another regardless of their academic levels and learning abilities.

Conclusions & Further Study

While the views of teachers and professionals is the central discussion and can be considered at the heart of this research study, it is imperative to consider the views and experiences of students with learning disabilities. Further research that would be beneficial to the nature of this topic would be to consider the views and social experiences of students with learning disabilities. The CRIME process that is outlined in Carter et al.’s (2006) study discusses how teachers should
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

analyze their classrooms and compare their classroom practices and environments to their students’ profiles (Carter et al., 2009, pg.63).

It would also be beneficial to assess the structure and practices of an integrative classrooms that focuses on social cohesion and inclusivity. However, this should be done through participant observation and over an extended period of time. A study of this nature could help educators view strategies in a first-hand way that would result in the most beneficial social ties between students with different learning abilities.

Overall, it would be beneficial to investigate the views and practices that directly impact the students with learning disabilities. There is a substantial amount of information on the practices and strategies that teachers can implement. The next steps would be to investigate how effective these strategies are. In the field of education, it is important to consider the views and perspectives of the students because they are the ones whose success and growth depends on the structure which we implement.

The research demonstrates that the social aspects are very much affiliated with the academic aspects within a school. It is important that educators are aware of the various implications that these strategies outline and what this means for our teaching. The positive climate within a classroom has the ability to develop a positive experience for a student. It is imperative that we consider the social aspect in all aspects of our teaching so that students feel welcomed and represented within their classrooms. If education endeavours to be successful for representing all types of learners, then the development of a holistic approach to social inclusion within the classroom is essential. This could provide the opportunity to enable students to become more vulnerable within their classrooms which could ultimately heighten their academic and social experiences within their classrooms.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

I would like to start off by thanking you for your time and your participation in this research study. A will ask you a series of ten questions and the interview should last between 30 and 45 minutes long. You are expected to answer them as you wish; I encourage you to be open and honest. I would like to remind you that your answers will remain anonymous. Do you have any questions before we begin?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Background Information

1. For how long have you been teaching for?
2. What grade do you teach?
3. How long have you been teaching this grade?
4. Do you have any Additional Qualifications courses?
5. Can you tell me about your class? (e.g., number of students, gender, abilities, students on IEPs, etc.)

Social Inclusion

6. The Ontario Ministry of Education’s ‘Inclusive Guide to Education’ states that, “equity and inclusive education identifies and eliminates barriers and meets individual needs”. How do you think these guidelines help to reinforce social inclusion within the classroom?
7. How do the students with learning disabilities form relationships with other classmates? What issues do you see?

Strategies for Inclusion

8. What are some strategies for social inclusion that you use and find effective within your classroom?
9. What ways, if any, do you alter the way you maintain an inclusive learning experience for your students when you have students with learning disabilities within your classroom? (I.e. different strategies are implemented, strengthened, etc.)
10. What particular strategies have you introduced when accommodating students with learning disabilities?
11. What team-building or other strategies do you use to strengthen peer-to-peer relationships among those students with and without learning disabilities within your integrative classroom?

**Obstacles**

12. What obstacles have you encountered in maintaining a sense of community for your students with learning disabilities?
13. Could you tell me about a time where a student with a learning disability felt as if he or she was not a part of the classroom? What did you do?
14. What supports, if any, are available in the school to support these students and their peer relationships?
15. Is there anything else that you would like to add in regards to strategies or practices that involve building social inclusion within the classroom?
Appendix B: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ___________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying special education within inclusive classrooms for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Kim Mackinnon. My research supervisor is Donna Duplak. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 40 minute interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher name: Erika Acevedo

Phone number, email: Erika.acevedo@mail.utoronto.ca

Instructor’s Name: Susan Schwartz
Phone number: _________________ Email: ___________________
Social Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities

Research Supervisor’s Name: Donna Duplak
Phone #: _____________________ Email: donna.duplak@utoronto.ca

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by _________________ (name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name (printed): __________________________________

Date: ______________________