Fostering Inclusion in the Classroom through Cooperative Learning

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Abstract

With the number of students on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) increasing in Ontario classrooms, educators need to implement instructional strategies that are responsive to the needs of students while still maintaining an inclusive environment and having integrity for the curriculum standards. Cooperative learning is an instructional strategy that allows educators to individualize instruction while still providing students with meaningful social experiences. This research examines how educators plan and implement cooperative learning activities that attend to the needs of students on IEPs. The data is presented in the form of a literature review and a findings chapter that discusses the experiences of two Ontario educators. Cooperative learning has both social and academic impacts for students on IEPs, including increased self-esteem and achievement. The inclusive instructional strategies within cooperative learning provide students with opportunities to feel part of a community where their voice is heard and represented. This research study is comprised of five chapters, including an introduction, comprehensive literature review, research methodology, presentation of the findings and a discussion on how this research impacts the broader education community.

**Key words:** inclusion, cooperative learning, instructional strategies, Individual Education Plans
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Chapter One: Introduction

“Let’s make our classrooms exciting, stimulating places where kids leave at the end of the day feeling better about themselves, feeling better about their peers and feeling better about their learning.” – Joanne, participant

The Ontario Ministry of Education defines inclusive education as education that includes and accepts all students (2009). Inclusive education includes having students see themselves reflected in the curriculum, in the classroom and in the school community. The Ministry of Education believes that all students and families should feel safe, welcomed and part of the school community (2009).

Inclusive education is an approach to fostering equity by educating elementary school children, with learning differences, in general classrooms rather than creating separate spaces for their learning (Mayrowetz and Weinstein, 1999). The most common approach to instructing children with learning modifications in the classroom is through the development of an Individual Education Plan to direct and track their learning. These plans allow teachers to design individualized instruction for children who have been identified as having a learning disability within their classroom (Deng, 2010). Teachers create plans that reflect the grade level a child is currently capable of working at, based on an assessment of their skills.

The Ontario Ministry of Education defines Individual Education Plans (IEP) as a “document identifying specific learning goals modified from the overall expectations within the curriculum to assist the student in succeeding” (Ministry of Education, 2000). These education plans can be an accommodated curriculum of the current grade level, or the plans may be modified where children are working at a grade level below their chronological grade. The role of a classroom teacher has become increasingly multifaceted and challenging as more children are put onto IEP’s each year and the amount children who are identified as exceptional becomes
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even greater. In addition to their regular classroom duties, teachers’ responsibilities in this context include collaborating with others to write the student IEP’s and facilitating classroom and activities that foster inclusion of students requiring accommodations or modifications. The focus of this research study is to investigate the ways in which classroom teachers are fostering inclusion of students on IEPs using the instructional strategies of cooperative learning.

Purpose of the Study

When reviewing the literature on this topic it is apparent that teachers have a variety of concerns regarding integrating children on IEP’s into group lessons. Teaching in an inclusive classroom requires a variety of supports in order to function effectively. These include: additional planning time, training, additional resources and aides as well as support from the principal and other staff members (Horne and Timmons, 2009). Within the provincial documents on IEP’s, it is stated that teachers are expected to use “a variety of teaching and learning strategies…peer partners, collaborative groups and cross-age tutoring,” (Ministry of Education, 2000, p.13). It is very important for children on IEP’s to participate in group learning, such as collaborative group work, as this form of teaching has been found to be effective in implementing the goals of inclusion (Deng, 2010).

However, for many teachers this option is not the most feasible one. While many teachers have a positive outlook on inclusion, they frequently lack the support and techniques to incorporate children on IEP’s into group learning opportunities (Horne and Timmons, 2009). In one study that focused on the perceptions of teachers on the topic of inclusion, researchers found that educators were concerned about a) not being able to individualize instruction, b) planning for students with a wide variety of needs and c) not challenging all students (Horne and Timmons, 2009). Accesses to in-service opportunities are also a concern for teachers, and they
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express interest in learning how to be efficient inclusion facilitators (Smith and Smith, 2000). Teachers wish to learn about practical ways in which they can facilitate the learning of all individuals in their classrooms. It is the belief of some teachers that understanding how others are successful in the field of inclusion can help their own practice (Smith and Smith, 2000).

Research Questions

As a beginning teacher I wish to understand strategies that have worked for others in their classrooms. Inclusion can be difficult for new teachers, mainly due to planning a full year of lessons for the first time, but also due to a lack of knowledge about learning disabilities (Florian and Rouse, 2010). The research question at the center of this study is: how are teachers designing lessons using cooperative learning strategies in ways that include and are responsive to the educational needs of students on Individual Education Plans in mainstream classrooms? The following subsidiary questions are also answered throughout this research study:

- What instructional strategies have these teachers employed to create opportunities for cooperative learning while also being responsive to students’ individualized learning needs?

- What challenges have teachers encountered doing this work?

- What impacts have these teachers observed on student inclusion?

- How have these teachers overcome the barriers that many other educators face when implementing cooperative learning strategies with students on IEPs?

- What kinds of experiences and resources have supported them and developed their confidence in this area?
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My interest was in learning what instructional strategies participating teachers use, what are the impacts of on students, what challenges were experienced, what range of resources and factors support them, and how they have learned to become confident in doing this work. The specific tension at the core of my research focus and my concerns as a beginning teacher is how to negotiate individualized instruction while still maintaining an inclusive classroom environment.

**Background of the Researcher**

Inclusive education has been an interest of mine since I began my undergraduate degree at the University of Guelph five years ago. It was during this time that I began working with children who required differentiated instruction through my Child, Youth and Family Studies program. When I began the Master of Teaching program at OISE, I was introduced to the inclusion process known as Tribes, created by Jeanne Gibbs (1970). The Tribes inclusion process brought forth my interest in using cooperative learning to include students who require modifications in the classroom, specifically children on Individual Education Plans (IEPs). In my previous experience working in the classroom, it came to my attention that children on IEPs work closely with Educational Assistants on a modified educational plan, or are sequestered in the corner of the room working on different tasks than their peers. In most cases, students on IEPs are not included during group learning opportunities, or if they are included, they are not gaining meaningful instruction from them. During practicum I was fortunate enough to witness one educator who incorporated students on IEPs into cooperative activities. The result was inspiring. The students were engaged, and confident and felt they were part of the classroom community. During my time in this classroom, I also felt part of the community and engaged with my students in ways I have not done as an educator before. Through this research, I have learned ways to incorporate students on IEPs into meaningful cooperative learning opportunities with their peers.
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I was interested in specifically using cooperative learning because it provides educators the opportunity to tailor instruction to individual children while still providing them the opportunity to learn from their peers. During my time in the Master of Teaching program, I have experienced the benefits of cooperative learning first hand and have enjoyed learning this way. It was during this time that I decided to investigate how cooperative strategies could be tailored to the needs of students on IEPs, and how they could inform my practice as a beginning teacher. During the course of the four practica I have completed over the last two years, I have integrated cooperative learning into my day planning. I have seen first-hand the ability to increase engagement in students on IEPs during the instructional day. Their confidence and engagement in the material was deeply enhanced with this type of instruction.

I believe in providing children with equitable learning opportunities in the classroom, which is why I focused closely on the topic of inclusion throughout this research study. Literature on this topic elucidates the reasoning behind teachers’ reluctance to provide cooperative learning opportunities, due to a variety of concerns related to the issues surrounding inclusion (Horne and Timmons, 2009). As a beginning teacher, who strongly values inclusive education, learning how to incorporate children on IEPs into cooperative learning activities has informed my teaching philosophy and my future instructional practice. It is my hope that through this research, more young educators will see the value of incorporating cooperative learning into their instructional repertoire and therefore enhance the learning of students within their classrooms.

Overview of the Study

Chapter One includes the introduction and purpose of this research study as well as how my personal and professional background has influenced this research. Chapter Two is a review
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of the relevant literature surrounding this topic that includes current approaches to inclusive education, an introduction to cooperative learning and teacher preparedness in regards to special education. Chapter Three outlines the methodology conducted during this qualitative research study, including a background of the participants and data collection. In Chapter Four, the key findings from the participant interviews are divided into five themes. Each theme is addressed in depth along with any sub-themes that presented themselves during the coding process. Chapter Five outlines the implications of the research findings on my own practice as well as the practice of others. Additionally I have made connections to the current body of literature on inclusion and cooperative learning. References and appendices follow at the end.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction
In the province of Ontario, students with learning impairments, physical disabilities and cognitive diagnoses are placed on Individual Education Plans that provide them with a structured plan to ensure their success in school. As per the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy as outlined by the Ministry of Education, each student has the right to an education where they feel part of a broad community as well as having their individualized needs met (2009). As educators, we are gifted with the task of teaching these individuals and creating lesson plans that meet their specific needs as well as the needs of the rest of the class. Inclusive education has been at the forefront of Ontario teaching practices since the introduction to the Special Education Amendment of the Education Act, or Bill 82 in 1980. As more and more children are being diagnosed with exceptionalities, it is crucial for school board and ministries of education to respond to the changing needs of their student populations (Florian and Rouse, 2010; Smith and Smith, 2000; Horne and Timmons, 2009).

These exceptionalities are no longer treated as a reason to separate children; rather these children are integrated into mainstream classrooms to work alongside typically developing peers. While mainstreaming has created a struggle for educators, there are ways in which to involve all students in the classroom community. This literature review focuses on inclusion within the classroom, the instructional strategies of cooperative learning as well as integrating the two together to create a community where all students learn together and from one another. The literature surrounding this topic has been carefully read and condensed, taking on multiple voices from various researchers within the field. This review, coupled with the findings in Chapter Four, have affirmed my belief in the importance of this topic in education, especially with the high prevalence of children on IEPs in today’s classrooms.
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**Inclusion**

Inclusive practices strive to educate children in mainstream classrooms rather than in a separate classroom environment. Inclusive practices provide the accommodations and modifications needed to make every child successful (Burnstein et al. 2004). Effective inclusion in the classroom provides equitable opportunities to every child, no matter what their learning needs. In a truly inclusive classroom environment all students are attended to and provided with cooperative learning opportunities that allow them to learn from their peers as well as work with their peers. As a beginning teacher, it is important to understand the barriers to implementing effective inclusion and the ways in which you can overcome these barriers. The levels of need in Ontario classrooms are changing and many classrooms have multiple children on IEPs, who require their individualized program in order to achieve academic success.

**Barriers to Inclusion**

While many philosophies of education promote inclusive practices in general education classrooms, when put into practice educators have found the practice of inclusion to be difficult (Florian and Rouse, 2010). While many practitioners believe inclusion is essential to an equitable classroom environment, there are still a multitude of barriers that lead to resistance from educators to become effective inclusion implementers. While teacher beliefs and attitudes promote inclusion in the classroom, teacher education and practice are at the forefront of barriers that lead to ineffective inclusion in the classroom (Florian and Rouse, 2010; Smith and Smith, 2000).

One of the greatest barriers stated in the literature to implementing inclusive practices is that of teacher education. Many educators feel that their education has not adequately prepared them for implementing effective inclusion in the classroom (Florian and Rouse, 2010; Smith and Smith, 2000; Horne and Timmons, 2009). Effective training and education can provide teachers
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with the ability to feel confident in the classroom (Florian and Rouse, 2010; Smith and Smith, 2000; Horne and Timmons, 2009). In today’s society there is a diverse world of learners whose needs will have to be addressed by their classroom teacher. Training educators to be effective at differentiating the learning of individual students is of extreme importance. Many teacher education programs do not offer a special education course during their one-year Bachelor of Education degree. At OISE, Master of Teaching students are afforded the opportunity of a mandatory special education course, as well as a condensed additional qualification at the end of the program. However, when teachers graduate from a program where special education courses are not taught inclusion can be difficult to achieve. As a beginning teacher there has not been enough training surrounding common learning difficulties of children (for example ADHD). It is important that educators are able to better understand the learning difficulty a child may have as well as be able to effectively individualize instruction for this student in order for them to be successful (Florian and Rouse, 2010). Many teachers do not feel adequately prepared to work with students with learning difficulties, which affects their ability to implement inclusive practices in the classroom (Horne and Timmons, 2009).

Many teacher education programs focus on curriculum content and pedagogy for typically developing learners and thus many new professionals will not experience working with students with learning difficulties until they are in their own classrooms (Florian and Rouse, 2010). Hardin explains that teacher education programs are leaving graduates feeling underprepared for an inclusive classroom environment (2002). There is a fundamental gap between teacher education and the ability to implement inclusive practices into the classroom environment (Florian and Rouse, 2010). Teacher education programs lack courses that allow teachers to succeed in special education settings where they are dealing with a population of
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diverse learners. Inclusive pedagogy needs to be put into practice for teacher candidates during
their practicum experiences (Forlin, 2010). Developing effective inclusive educators requires
thinking about inclusion in different ways and using tested strategies that have been shown to
work in this area (Florian and Rouse, 2010). When teachers feel prepared to differentiate
learning and create an inclusive classroom they are more likely to be successful at providing
effective inclusive instruction. However, many professional’s who are highly motivated to be
successful in the area of inclusion are also more likely to be an effective implementer in other
areas as well (Florian and Rouse, 2010).

Class sizes and support within the classroom are another cause for concern for educators
when implementing effective inclusion in the classroom. Many classrooms in Ontario have
upwards of twenty to thirty students to one teacher in the classroom. Large class sizes with
multiple students with learning difficulties are causes for concerns for teachers (Smith and
Smith, 2000). When implementing effective inclusion, teachers with large class sizes and a
higher number of students with learning difficulties feel unsuccessful in terms of their
implementation of inclusive practices (Smith and Smith, 2000). Many teachers feel that planning
for a large group of students with a high level of differentiated needs can be detrimental to their
ability to implement effective inclusion (Smith and Smith, 2000).

Lack of support from the school community is another barrier that can cause difficulty for
educators when implementing inclusive practices. The school community is a large indicator of
whether or not a teacher will be successful in providing inclusive opportunities to his/her
students (Horne and Timmons, 2009). Many parents struggle to be supportive of inclusive
education for a variety of reasons, including that they do not wish to see their child ridiculed for
having different learning needs (Horne and Timmons, 2009). Creating a classroom environment
where students are accepting of their peers, who may have exceptional needs, is highly important for inclusive practices to be effective (Horne and Timmons, 2009). In-class support is exceedingly important for teachers when implementing effective inclusion, but is not common in many classroom environments (Smith and Smith, 2000). With the rise of differentiated learners, the need for educational assistants has become even more critical (Smith and Smith, 2000). Teaching professionals who believe they are unsuccessful at implementing effective inclusion attribute a lack of in-class support to their level of competency surrounding inclusion. Professionals believe that working collaboratively alongside another professional would increase their ability to be an effective implementer (Smith and Smith, 2000). The research has demonstrated that teacher’s who feel successful at effective inclusion receive help from professionals outside the classroom, including special education resource teachers and educational assistants (Grenier, Dyson and Yeaton, 2005). In a study by Grenier et al (2005), teachers who worked collaboratively with the administration and other professionals were found to be successful in overcoming this barrier to inclusive education

Adequate planning time and resources are the final barriers stated in the literature as a cause of concern for teaching professionals (Horne and Timmons, 2009). Time is a valuable resource in the teaching profession, especially when planning for a variety of students spanning a variety of needs. Providing teachers with resources to aid in this planning is also instrumental in the success of inclusive practice (Grenier, Dyson and Yeaton, 2005; Horne and Timmons, 2009; Smith and Smith, 2000). Teachers are concerned with having adequate time to prepare for and meet the educational needs of their students. In order to provide equitable inclusion opportunities for students while still meeting their educational needs, teachers require time and resources that are not currently provided (Horne and Timmons, 2009). In a study conducted by Smith and
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Smith, teachers who considered themselves successful at implementing an inclusive program noted that planning time was key for effective instruction. Relatedly, teachers who struggled with inclusive programming noted that lack of adequate planning time was a key factor (2000).

While these barriers are causes for concern for educators implementing inclusive practices within their classroom, there are many benefits to creating an inclusive community within the school environment as well as the classroom environment. Research is lacking in discussing the ways in which teachers are overcoming these barriers and the strategies they are using to provide inclusive instruction.

Creating Inclusive Communities

In order for inclusion to be successful, there are a multitude of stakeholders that must all work together in order to create an environment conducive to inclusive learning. Teachers who believe in inclusive practice and are successful at maintaining it have acknowledged that support from the surrounding community is extremely important (Smith and Smith, 2000). Van Dyke et al (2005) argue that teachers need to maintain high expectations, for when we lower our expectations as educators we do not see children succeed to their full capacity. It is important that educators create an environment where children respect and understand one another. In terms of creating an inclusive environment where all children can learn and succeed, it is crucial to create a community where all students feel that their voices are heard. This type of environment is beneficial for children in all capacities of learning, not just children with learning difficulties.

Support from the community in which a teacher works is a strong indicator of an effective inclusion program (Ashdown, 2010; Hornby, 2010). It is important that educators and parents work together to implement the best program for each child (Hornby, 2010). Working
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collaboratively with parents in developing Individual Education Plans as well as courses of action that will be implemented in the classroom are vital to the success of inclusion (Ashdown, 2010). Educators do not need to work alone when it comes to developing a plan that will fit the child’s educational needs. Parent-school communication is important when creating an inclusive community, where collaboration between all stakeholders is evident (Hornby, 2010).

The support of the administration is another key factor to creating an inclusive learning community. If there is a lack of belief in the community for the work you are doing, there will likely be a disconnect in the support a teacher is receiving within the school. Teachers who believe in implementing inclusion using cooperative learning strategies do so when there is an abundance of support for what they are doing (Burnstein et al., 2010). Principals play an important role in an inclusive community and those who take on inclusive learning practices, such as cooperative learning, as a school-wide initiative see the most success (Van Dyke, Stallings, Colley, 1995). It is important that teachers who are implementing inclusive learning practices are supported by the administration of the school (Goor and Schwenn, 1993). Principals can plan strategy meetings where teachers can work collaboratively together, plan extra prep time for teachers who have a wide variety of children with educational needs and they can help implement school wide initiatives to make inclusion acceptable. Students need to learn how to work together and be accepting of students whose needs may be different from their own. It is up to teachers, principals and the surrounding community to make sure that the inclusive learning that is occurring is meaningful and successful (Van Dyke, Stallings, Colley, 1995).

Individual Education Plans

The Ministry of Education defines Individual Educations Plans as a document that describes the special education plan for a particular student (2000). This document provides a
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detailed plan for students who are working on a modified curriculum (i.e. they are only required
to meet certain curriculum expectations) or on an accommodated basis whereby they are
provided with specific strategies (i.e. a laptop) but are still graded based on the curriculum
expectations for the grade where they are placed (Ministry of Education, 2000). While the IEP
provides teachers with the expectations of a particular student it does not provide the educator
with lesson plans to facilitate an individual’s learning needs.

As an IEP is developed students’ strengths and areas of need are documented within the
IEP, which allows educators to understand what is expected of each child. The IEP is edited each
term in order to provide an updated outlook at what the child requires within the classroom
(Ministry of Education, 2000). The purpose of the IEP is to allow students with learning
disabilities, physical disabilities and cognitive disorders to be integrated into mainstream
classrooms. These plans are meant to provide the educator with an outline for how to plan for
this particular student. While this form of inclusion is successful in many classrooms, it also
leaves room for students to be singled out because of their difference in learning. In my
experience I have seen children on IEPs often working alone or with another adult, while the
other students in the classroom work together. Generally, students would be working on
something different than their peers and were not involved during group activities on the basis
that they were not completing the same level of work.

I have been fortunate enough to teach in a classroom where students on IEPs were involved
in cooperative group activities, such as inside/outside circle, and their level of engagement with
the material was high. Each student was able to contribute to the group, using expectations from
his/her individualized program, and they also had increased levels of confidence. An
inside/outside circle is an inclusive activity that provides students with the opportunity to work
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with a number of their peers in order to discuss or summarize a concept (Kagan, 1994). During this activity, all students are included in the circle, either being a member of the outside circle or a member of the inside circle. The inside circle members and outside circle members face one another so that they have a partner in front of them. The teacher then acts as a facilitator in the center of the circle and prompts students with questions regarding the concept (Kagan, 1994). Once students have has discussion time with their partner students in the outside circle move one partner to their left/right and are then discussing the concept with a new partner. This allows students to discuss the concept with multiple peers and increases their attainment of the concept, while including all students in the classroom in the activity (Kagan, 1994).

**Cooperative Learning**

Cooperative learning is an instructional method in which students work together in groups in order to complete an activity (Johnson and Johnson, 1999; Emmer and Gerwels, 2002). There are five basic elements that are essential to the successful implementation of cooperative learning in the classroom. Johnson and Johnson (1999) created the five essential components needed in the instructional practice of cooperative learning. The five basic elements are: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, social skills and group processing. Positive interdependence is the understanding that peers influence their own learning, whereby an individual cannot succeed on their own. Individual accountability requires children to understand that they cannot take from their group members and not contribute. This aspect of cooperative learning provides the opportunity for students to understand their stake within the group and their accountability not only to themselves but also to their peers. Face-to-face interaction requires students to work in small groups where they will interact with one another closely (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). Students need to be taught the social skills that are required for working in cooperative groups. Students cannot be expected to understand how to
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interact collaboratively without being taught how to do so. Group processing occurs as students work through their academic tasks, strive to achieve goals and solve problems along the way (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). The students can then process their cooperation with a view to learning how well the activities went and what can be improved for future experiences.

During cooperative activities, students learn from one another in a meaningful way and deepen their understanding of the content being discussed. This type of learning has been found to have the potential to diminish the competitiveness of classrooms and focuses on bringing students together to complete activities (Emmer and Gerwels, 2002). Students work collaboratively to discuss topics, argue their own opinion as well as help enhance one another’s understanding of material (Veenman et al., 2002). The successful use of cooperative learning is completed in a structured and meaningful way; students are not placed into groups without understanding their accountability to one another. It is this individual accountability that allows students to achieve more academically in cooperative groups. Students are accountable to themselves as well as to their group members, which increases their engagement in the activity (Slavin, 1992).

Veenman and colleagues (2002) suggest that students should work in heterogeneous groups, with high achieving students working with lower achieving students. They argue that these groupings can have positive effects on inclusion and can promote more positive attitudes towards students with learning difficulties. Other studies have similarly found that heterogeneous grouping can promote acceptance and enhance the social skills development of all children involved (Emmer and Gerwels, 2002). The five elements of cooperative learning can mould together to provide meaningful opportunities for all students in a classroom and not only for students on Individual Education Plans. Cooperative learning opportunities allow students to
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engage in a different type of instruction where they are learning more from their peers and less from their teacher (Slavin, 2014). These strategies allow students with learning difficulties to speak with their peers about the misunderstandings rather than always going to the teacher or being singled out. Cooperative learning has become more prominent in the past few decades, with teachers learning how to implement this type of instruction in their classroom environment (Dick, 1991; Veenman et al., 2002).

There are many different instructional strategies that can be used in a cooperative learning classroom and it is not to say that all classrooms that participate in cooperative learning do so in a strict manner without other forms of instruction. However, cooperative learning as an instructional strategy allows educators to plan lessons that include all children and incorporate all of their educational needs (Emmer and Gerwels, 2002). Goor and Schwenn (1993) suggest that there are five common formats of cooperative learning activities; teachers are able to structure these activities to the needs of their students and tailor each activity to the curriculum area being covered. These five activities include: student teams-achievement divisions, think-pair-share, jigsaw, team-accelerated instruction and group investigation. Student teams and achievement division includes having students completing worksheets together but taking individual tests. Think-pair-share involves students thinking about a topic or question on their own, then moving on to share their ideas with a partner and finally sharing both ideas with the whole group (Goor and Schwenn, 1993). Jigsaw requires students to take a piece of information and teach it to their group members; each student becomes an expert on a particular aspect of a topic. Team accelerated instruction involves students working together on a team to accumulate points, while completing individual assignments. Finally, group investigation involves decision making surrounding responsibility with the group. Each group of students work together to attain goals
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set out for the achievement of learning goals and the group decides which role each student will take on (Goor and Schwenn, 1993). Goor and Schwenn (1993) suggest that students with learning differences can have difficulty understanding their roles within a group. Therefore, it is important for educators to explain to students in detail their role within the group and what is expected of them in the group activity. It is also important to continually check understanding throughout.

Teachers and students are accountable for monitoring their actions and providing feedback to the group members. A study by Emmer and Gerwels (2002) suggested that successful cooperative learning lessons incorporated the following characteristics: high individual accountability, high teacher monitoring, and use of manipulatives, task interdependence and a high amount of feedback. Teacher monitoring and feedback are essential components to cooperative learning (Goor and Schwenn, 1993). It is important that teachers set guidelines from the outset of cooperative learning. Students need to understand the appropriate behaviour when working in groups and how to support one another as they learn (Goor and Schwenn, 1993). Students need reassurance and guidance that they are completing the task correctly or may need assistance in solving group disputes. Educators can enhance student learning in a cooperative setting by monitoring their progress and asking thoughtful questions that raise a discussion in the group (Emmer and Gerwels, 2002; Dick, 1991). Monitoring is also important when integrating students on Individual Education Plans into cooperative learning groups. The teacher must monitor whether or not students are benefitting from the lesson plan and then modify accordingly.

Providing students with cooperative learning opportunities promotes their ability to succeed in the classroom environment (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). Working together, rather
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than alone is much more effective for students with learning differences, especially when they work in heterogeneous groupings (Dick, 1991). Cooperative learning may be an effective strategy to include students with IEPs in the classroom. This type of instruction allows students to work with their peers, rather than individually and helps them to understand the material at a higher level of thinking. Slavin (2014) suggests that cooperative learning has an increased effect on learning, specifically in the areas of motivation and understanding. Cooperative learning allows students to learn meaningfully and authentically with their peers in their own way. Cooperative learning is style of differentiated instruction that incorporates all learners in the process.

*Integrating Inclusion and Cooperative Learning*

Creating a learning community that integrates inclusion and cooperative learning provides support for students on Individual Education Plans (Cross and Walker-Knight, 1997). In a study by Gillies and Ashman (2000) students who work together collaboratively help their peers who do not understand a concept and explain the concept in terms that the student can understand, students relate to one another on a level that teachers have difficulty reaching in some contexts. Gillies and Ashman (2000) have suggested that students with learning difficulties who work collaboratively with non-identified peers have a higher rate of success than students who did not participate in collaborative learning opportunities. Jenkins and colleagues (2003) found a similar result in a study on cooperative learning for students with learning differences. It was found that many students were able to accomplish more through cooperative groups than individual instruction. Students produced better work products and were able to articulate their learning in a more concrete way (Jenkins et al. 2003). Cooperative learning activities allow students with learning differences to work on social skills such as listening, responding to peer questions and cooperation with peers (Jenkins et al. 2003). Peers can clarify for students the expectations of the
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assignments as well as model what ideal performance looks like. For students on IEPs this is critical to their learning. Students are able to develop their social skills with the help of their peers while also learning from their peers in a controlled environment (Jenkins et al. 2003).

When planning cooperative lessons for students on Individual Education plans, it is important to consider what you wish them to achieve as well as what challenges can be added to enhance their learning. Students will learn from their higher level-thinking classmates and achieve more if they are challenged (Gillies and Ashman, 2000). As with differentiating the learning occurring in cooperative learning, you can also differentiate the assessment criteria. It is important that educators create success criteria that benefits students educational needs and also speaks to the work they have completed in the group task (Schniedewind and Davidson, 2000).

Cooperative learning opportunities can be beneficial in inclusive classrooms as it encourages students to work together in a positive environment where all students are viewed as equal. Cooperative learning may provide students the opportunity to work with one another in a safe space and allow peers to help one another succeed (Cross and Walker-Knight, 1997). Students are able to accomplish more in a smaller amount of time and have the added benefit of working together to solve problems (Dick, 1991). Johnson and Johnson suggest that working cooperatively with peers enhances an individual’s self-esteem, social competence and increases their ability to succeed during group work with others (1991). In a study by Jenkins et al, it was found that the self-esteem of students with learning differences was increased substantially when they were working in cooperative learning groups (2003). Students felt that they were part of a team and were more likely to participate in the activity. The same study found that many teachers believe that cooperative learning allows students with learning differences a less stressful learning environment where they are comfortable taking risks (Jenkins et al. 2003).
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For students on Individual Education Plans, this type of learning has the potential to enhance their social skills within the classroom and allows them to be fully included in equitable learning. This instructional strategy increases student participation, self-esteem and confidence in the classroom, which translate into their learning (Jenkins et al. 2003). It creates a safe environment where students feel compelled to participate and put forth their best effort. Cooperative learning is comprised of instructional strategies that can be implemented for all learners and creates a classroom community where students are motivated to participate. Increased student motivation leads to increased student achievement (Slavin, 2014).

Conclusion
Integrating cooperative learning strategies within the classroom for students on Individual Education Plans provides each student with the opportunity to engage and learn with their peers. In order to facilitate such learning within the classroom, teachers need to be committed to planning and implementing these strategies within the classroom. From reading the literature surrounding this topic, it is clear that cooperative learning can be used for the inclusion of students on IEPs. Cooperative learning has many benefits in the classroom including increased motivation, increased participation, increased self-esteem and higher levels of student achievement. There are a variety of cooperative learning strategies that can be implemented into the classroom in a variety of ways; teachers are also able to individualize instruction based on the needs of their students. Classrooms where cooperative learning takes place are safe communities where students’ voices are heard.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Procedure
This research paper follows a qualitative style of research, as determined by the criteria set out for the Master of Teaching students at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Creswell defines qualitative research as the study of research problems relating to a social or human problem (2013). As educators, we come into contact with numerous social and human problems within our classrooms. This qualitative research study focused on the use of cooperative learning strategies for including students on IEPs and combines an extensive review of the literature surrounding the topic with informal interviews. I acquired two participants for this study and conducted face-to-face one-on-one interviews with both of them. Both participants are retired Ontario teachers, each with extensive experience in the field of cooperative learning. The findings of this research are presented in a narrative style, in order to ensure the experience of both individuals are fully captured.

Instruments of Data Collection
A comprehensive literature review and two participant interviews were the main source of data collection used in this research study. The literature review conducted on the topic provided a background on what research has already been completed on the topic as well as challenges that face new educators in the classroom regarding inclusion. Interviewing is an effective technique in qualitative research as it incorporates the voice of leaders in the field the research is being conducted (Creswell, 2013). As the findings of this research study are presented in a narrative style of qualitative research, interviews were the ideal source of data collection. Interviewing allowed participants to share their beliefs and experiences surrounding the topic of cooperative learning and inclusion. Both participants had a strong belief in inclusion and implementing cooperative learning activities into their daily teaching practice. Informal
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interviews that consisted of 17 questions and lasted about 60 minutes each were conducted with both participants. Examples of questions asked include:

1. What challenges have you experienced in regards to establishing inclusive practices within your classroom or school? How did you respond to these challenges?

2. What experiences have you had related to initiating and implementing cooperative learning within your classroom or school? What courses or workshops have you taken that assisted you to more effectively implement cooperative learning?

3. What instructional methods do you find most useful when including students on IEPs in cooperative learning activities? Why are they useful?

A full list of interview questions used during the data collection process can be found in Appendix B of this research study.

Participants
Participants for this research study were found using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling involves selecting participants that will inform the research question being presented within the study (Creswell, 2013). My primary method of finding participants depended on discussion with colleagues and the help of my research supervisor. This research was conducted by interviewing two Ontario teachers, both of whom were retired at the time the interviews were conducted. Between the participants, one was a Caucasian male and the other was a Caucasian female, both retired teachers who each had over 25 years of teaching experience. The following criteria was used in determining the participants for this study:

1. Five or more years teaching experience, which provided for teachers that have experience working with students on IEPs.
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2. Experience planning cooperative learning activities that incorporate children on IEPs.

3. Experience with cooperative learning, whether they had an additional certificate or had
   attended workshops regarding cooperative learning.

4. Have an additional qualification in Special Education.

5. Primary/Junior teaching qualifications, either currently teaching at this level or are recently
   retired.

I chose to interview participants based on the above criteria because I wanted to gain the
experience and expertise of teachers who had successfully incorporated cooperative learning into
their classrooms. Understanding the instructional strategies these teachers used in including
students in IEPs into cooperative learning activities was essential to this study. I wanted
individuals who would have expertise to offer in regards to the main research question and who
would also be able to speak to their own personal experience in the classroom.

The participants who were chosen to be part of this research study were Joanne and David
(pseudonyms). Joanne is a retired principal of a public school board who has over 25 years of
experience in the field of cooperative learning. Joanne has worked in a variety of schools and has
opened two schools where all staff members were trained in the process of Tribes. Joanne is a
Tribes certified trainer who currently spends her retirement training teachers across Canada in
the process of Tribes. Her experience in the field of cooperative learning was invaluable to this
research study. David is a retired elementary school teacher who has taught a variety of different
grades over the course of his career. David is also Tribes certified and spent some of his teaching
career as a cooperative learning consultant for the board in which he worked. David has worked
for both the public school board as well as the private school sector. His experience
implementing cooperative learning in his own classroom added a rich level of information to the findings of this study.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Two interviews were conducted with the participants in this research study. The interviews were each about 60-minutes in length and consisted of 17 interview questions related to the research questions. Each interview was audio-recorded using an electronic device and were then transcribed by myself, the researcher. After the interviews were transcribed, I began to read the transcribed interviews and looked for themes that were present in both interviews. During this process, I wrote key words that consistently appeared throughout the interviews, for example: instruction, inclusion and barriers. I focused on five central themes that emerged in both transcribed interviews. Once the transcriptions had been thoroughly read through, I began to colour-code the data based on the five relevant themes. Each transcription was coded a total of three times, to ensure that the themes were accurately captured. Once each transcription had been coded, each theme was organized into a table, which included both participants’ quotes relating to each particular theme. This coding table was then used to write the findings chapter of this research study, which can be found in chapter four of the study.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

In accordance with the University of Toronto—OISE, this research study follows the ethical protocol approved by the Research Ethics Board (REB) for Master of Teaching students. Prior to conducting the interviews, my research supervisor approved my interview questions and each participant signed a copy of the consent letter found in Appendix A. I made the interview questions available to each participant prior to the conducted interview in order for them to be made aware of what they would be asked during the interview. Each participant chose a date and
time that worked best for them. One interview was conducted at the University of Toronto, while the other interview was conducted via Skype.

In order to maintain the confidentiality of both participants, during the transcription process each participant was assigned a pseudonym that was used in the findings chapter of this research study. These pseudonyms preserved the anonymity of the participants and participants were informed of this procedure at the time the consent letter was signed. The recorded data is protected on my own personal computer and both audio submissions were destroyed upon completion of the transcriptions. Each participant was made aware that they would receive a copy of this research study upon its completion if requested and were able to e-mail me with any concerns after their interview was conducted.

**Strengths and Limitations**

With qualitative research there are many strengths and limitations to consider. The limitations of this project include that it contained a small sample size, i.e. two participants and it was conducted during a short time frame. The small sample size and condensed time frame speak to the lack of generalizability of the research I have presented in this study. In this research study there were only two methods of data collection: a literature review and informal interviews. Limited data collection was a large limitation in terms of the research I conducted. It would have been very beneficial to observe educators implementing cooperative learning activities within the classroom. With only having conducted one interview with each participant, this research was also limited in its ability to show growth over time. This research relied on the experiences of educators in the field, who may have exerted social desirability bias in order to maintain their standing in the professional community. Social desirability bias occurs when participants elicit attitudes or beliefs that are perceived as socially acceptable within society (Furr, 2010).
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Particular attitudes can be seen as either valuable or stigmatized within a particular society, including views on education (Furr, 2010). Discussing attitudes towards inclusion in the classroom, in a society where inclusion is deeply valued, may have caused this bias to occur. While the use of pseudonyms diminished the need to be viewed as socially desirable, educators still may have felt the need to embellish upon their past experiences.

Qualitative research provided real life beliefs and experience surrounding a particular phenomenon. Conducting a literature review on this topic showed me the importance of this research in the educational community. The literature review created a context within which the study was situated. The literature speaks to the themes presented within this study as well as themes that emerged during the interviews. With more and more students being put on IEPs in order to modify the curriculum as well as accommodate specific needs, teachers have to be aware of strategies they can use to build an inclusive community within their classroom.

Interviewing professionals in the field of education allows for first hand experience in relation to the research questions. As a researcher who wishes to use this information in their own teaching practice, conducting interviews with individuals who are successful was very beneficial to my own teaching practice and the practice of other colleagues. It provided the voice of teachers who implemented this type of practice within their classroom and used their own perspective to answer the research questions presented in this study. The methods used to conduct this study and analyze the data collected through the interviews allowed for a generous amount of findings, presented in the next chapter.
Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

This chapter outlines the data collected from the interviews conducted with the two previously mentioned participants in this study. The participants of this research study had been classroom teachers who employed the instructional strategies of cooperative learning into their classroom and have had success including students on IEPs in the process. Each participant had been a classroom teacher in either the public board and/or in a private school setting.

This chapter focuses on the interviews conducted with Joanne and David, the participants in this study. David and Joanne both described their experiences with cooperative learning in the classroom as heavily influenced by Tribes, developed by Jeanne Gibbs in the 1970’s. Tribes is not based on the curriculum, it is an ongoing goal-oriented process that attends to children’s academic, social and emotional development (Gibbs, 2006). Tribes provides educators with a non-traditional process that incorporates all students within the classroom and develops a rich learning community that supports all learners (Gibbs, 2006).

Joanne is a retired teacher with over 25 years experience teaching in the public board. Joanne was also an administrator for many years and is certified in the process of Tribes. During her time as a principal, she opened two schools using the process of Tribes and cites cooperative learning as deeply embedded in her teaching experience and philosophy. David is also a retired classroom teacher who worked in both the public board and a private school. His teaching practice was deeply rooted in cooperative learning and was the focus of his instruction over the course of his teaching career. David was also certified in the process of Tribes and worked as a Tribes trainer as well.
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During the interviews, themes surrounding the topic of cooperative learning as a process of instruction for children on IEPs emerged and developed. After the data was transcribed and coded, five consistent themes had emerged: a) **instructional strategies classroom teachers use to implement cooperative learning**, b) **inclusion practices within the classroom**, c) **impact of cooperative learning on both students on IEPs and neurotypical students**, d) **resources available to teachers in their schools** and e) **the challenges teachers face when implementing cooperative learning in the classroom environment**. This chapter will outline each theme in detail, including the sub-themes found within each theme if sub-themes had presented themselves during the coding process.

**Instructional Strategies**

The main focus of this research study is the instructional strategies that classroom teachers use in order to facilitate cooperative learning for students on IEPs. This theme was the largest theme to emerge from the data collected during the interviews, which was expected, as it is the main priority of this study. Both participants discussed in depth the importance of instructional strategies in the implementation of this teaching method. In both interviews the following instructional strategies were mentioned and will be discussed in further depth: Johnson and Johnson’s five elements of cooperative learning, heterogeneous groupings, accountability, and reflection on learning.

**Johnsons’ Five Basic Elements**

Cooperative learning is not only group work—it has purposeful elements that educators must consider when planning their instruction using this strategy. Both participants emphasized the importance of understanding Johnson and Johnson’s five basic elements of cooperative learning. These five elements include: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, social skills and group processing.
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David and Joanne were both very vocal about the integration of the five elements during cooperative learning. As a teacher using cooperative learning in the classroom, it is essential to follow all five elements in order for the activity to be meaningful and successful. Both participants discussed the need for intensive lesson planning when beginning to use cooperative learning. Joanne explained: “I even developed a lesson plan where on the right hand side of it, I had the five elements. And had little checkmarks beside them, because I would say to my staff when you’re planning your group activities, are you thinking about these five components?” (Interview, Joanne, December 2014). She believed that if you were mindful of where these five elements would occur, your lesson would benefit all students.

David also agreed that the five components developed by Johnson and Johnson was necessary for effective instruction. David mentioned the importance of also discussing the five elements with your students so they understand their role within the group. David would make t-charts for his classroom that discuss what the five elements looked like and sounded like when being done properly. He discussed that structuring your lessons with these five elements in mind were absolutely critical in order for it to work in the classroom.

Heterogeneous Groupings

When it comes to integrating cooperative learning into your teaching instruction, both participants discussed the importance of understanding when it was appropriate to use heterogeneous groupings. Heterogeneous groupings are deliberate groupings that include students with a variety of different academic levels and needs. These groupings allow students to learn from each other and include different strengths and needs. David explained, “I would seat my students in groups of four. I placed them in a heterogeneous group, which was another one of the basic elements. I did not just place all the kids who liked each other together, or kids from the
Heterogeneous groupings benefit students with learning differences as they allow students to work with people who may have strengths that the student on the IEP is working on achieving. David explained that a large aspect of cooperative learning is “heterogeneous groupings, pairing your strong kids with other strong kids, but also with your students on IEPs” (Interview, David, November 2014). While David was a big believer in using heterogeneous groupings for the majority of your instruction, Joanne believed that you need to be strategic about when you pair students into heterogeneous groupings and when you do not. She explained: “I think you want to structure those groups, where you have IEP kids, very carefully” (Interview, Joanne, December 2014).

Joanne discussed that she believed there were specific times where heterogeneous groupings would be beneficial and other times where it was best to keep students of the same level together. For example Joanne said:

Maybe you think carefully about which groups you do cooperative learning activities with heterogeneous groups in and which you don’t. So if you know your student has a learning disability in math, perhaps in that situation the cooperative group could be students who are at their level or close to their level. (Interview, Joanne, December 2014)

She went on to discuss that while there are times where students on IEPs need to be grouped with students at similar levels, it was also important to group them heterogeneously when it is in their best interest to do so. She discussed that it was up to the classroom teacher to understand student needs and their capabilities when working within a group. Joanne said:

I guess you’re grouping kids sometimes at similar levels and then other times you’re heterogeneously grouping them so that the child benefits from kids who have different strengths and who they can learn from. But then there are times where they will need to be pulled out into smaller groups with kids who are working at the same grade level as them. (Interview, Joanne, December 2014)
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Heterogeneous grouping are an essential component to cooperative learning and having students learn effectively. Both participants discussed the impact strong students can have on students with IEPs during cooperative learning activities. This impact will be discussed in detail during the discussion in Chapter Five.

Accountability

Both participants discussed the importance of accountability in regard to the implementation of cooperative learning in the classroom. In terms of having cooperative learning be successful and effective in the classroom, both David and Joanne discussed the necessity of having an accountability piece built in for students. Joanne explained: “If you don’t have that accountability piece built into the structure of your cooperative learning activity—you’re not going to have the effectiveness” (Interview, Joanne, December 2014). Accountability was discussed by both participants in terms of building student accountability into your lesson design and making sure that students understand they are accountable not only to themselves but also to their group members. David explained: “Its that accountability piece and having them understand that they are accountable to someone other than themselves” (Interview, David, November 2014). Examples of accountability discussed by both participants included reflection on student learning, understanding their individual accountability to the whole group as well as working with a group but handing in individual assignments.

David and Joanne both believed that accountability was a necessary component of having a successful classroom where cooperative learning was a common strategy for instruction. In terms of students on IEPs, both participants discussed the necessity of having these students also be accountable to their learning. David explained: “They would have to justify what they did in the group academically, and academically the only way you were going to learn was if you
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worked with other kids. And if you tried to work by yourself you couldn’t” (Interview, David, November 2014). David discussed that in his classroom students understood that they needed to work with their group members and put in the same amount of effort in order to be successful in their learning. Joanne also discussed that accountability was central to student success and the effectiveness of cooperative learning. Both participants were believers in the accountability aspect of cooperative learning as being essential.

David went further to explain that in his classroom he always went by the idea that no student could be successful as the leader in the group and that no student could float by and be successful either. He explained that even with students on IEPs you need to develop a sense of accountability for the work they are completing in their groups. David suggested: “You need to add in the accountability piece when you push beyond the pair groupings, so that someone does not become a floater and a leader. Everyone must be accountable and doing the same amount of work” (Interview, David, November 2014). Both participants felt this piece is key for students on IEPs—as they are able to have a part within the group where they understand their role and what they need to complete in order to be successful.

Reflection on Learning

A component of instruction that both participants brought up, as also being key to student success, was the reflection students complete on their learning. The reflection on learning is one of the components of Johnson and Johnson’s five basic elements; it is described as processing what student’s have learned. Both participants noted that this aspect of instruction was critical to the retention of concepts and the contribution each group member made during the activity.

Joanne discussed that reflection was a key aspect for her when she used cooperative learning in her classroom. She explained:
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The reflection piece, talking about your learning is huge. If you have students talk about their own learning, you probably won’t have to teach that concept again. That’s how your brain creates connection, by talking about what you’ve learned. Never forget to give them the opportunity to reflect on their learning. And make sure to include the social element too. (Interview, Joanne, December 2014)

For Joanne, reflection was a critical component to the retention of learning for students. It was the element that she was the most adamant about including in your cooperative learning activities. Joanne discussed that during her time as an administrator she would consistently ensure that her teachers were including the reflection piece in their lesson plans. Joanne said that the processing of concepts your brain completes during this time is essential to students understanding.

Similarly, David agreed that student reflection on learning was a large part of cooperative learning activities. David used processing and journaling within his classrooms in order for students to reflect on their use of the five basic elements. David also explained that during this reflection process, he would ensure concepts were understood using the method of checking for understanding. David explained:

Checking for understanding, making kids almost like the teacher. Or if you want to use Madeline Hunter’s idea of input, and the checks for understanding not just coming from the teacher. The kids learn to access other kids for information and they see it as their responsibility to check other people and to care if other people are doing their jobs. (Interview, David, November 2014)

It was David’s belief that checking for understanding and journaling were important indicators of student success in the area you were teaching. David discussed that he would collect journals at the end of the unit and uses the journals as an assessment tool for student success. He said that as a teacher you could learn quite a lot of information from the journals and would be able to determine whether or not a student successfully learned the concepts of that particular unit. For
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both participants, the reflection piece was just as important as including accountability in your cooperative learning activities.

Inclusion Practices within the Classroom

Joanne and David are both trained in the process of Tribes and also work as Tribes trainers. Tribes is a process of inclusion that provides teachers with a continuum of creating a classroom community where all students feel welcomed and safe. Both Joanne and David believe that their teaching practice was enhanced through the use of Tribes within their classrooms. They credit this inclusion practice as one of the ways they were able to create a safe and positive climate within their classrooms and school communities. Throughout the interviews the concepts of having a safe and positive school community were consistently mentioned in conjunction with the ability to be successful in implementing cooperative learning. Both participants discussed that it was essential to have a classroom community where all students felt safe and were willing to take risks and try new ways of learning.

Joanne described her inclusion practices as absolutely critical to creating a classroom community. She explained: “I think that inclusion is a very positive way to look at creating a positive classroom community, for everybody” (Interview, Joanne, December 2014). David agreed that inclusion was a critical piece to the cooperative learning foundation, he described that he was able to see immediate benefits once he began team-building exercises within his classroom. While Tribes is not the only way to foster inclusion in the classroom, it was the process that both participants followed in order to achieve a positive and welcoming classroom community.

In terms of the importance of an inclusive learning environment for students on IEPs, both Joanne and David believe that students who may feel stigmatized due to their learning
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difference understand that they are as equally welcome as someone who may be stronger academically. David discussed that for students on IEPs being a part of an inclusive community can be critical to their ability to participate and grow in the classroom. He explained:

The students who might be reluctant to talk have the floor, just like everyone else. He/she has the structure that allows him/her to have a distinct part, he doesn’t have to worry about everything else, and he/she just has to worry about his/her part in it. When he/she gets to more complex ideas and complex concepts, he/she can do that with the help of other people. (Interview, David, November 2014)

David believes that for students on IEPs, this classroom of positivity and safety is a huge component of their success during cooperative learning activities. Joanne agreed that inclusion was a powerful tool for enhancing learning and for helping students on IEPs feel safe. Joanne explained: “Fundamentally, it is about the brain and how you make kids feel safe. That they feel respected and they feel safe. Especially our kids on IEPs. The problem I have with IEPs and identifying kids is that there is an automatic stigma attached” (Interview, Joanne, December 2014). Joanne believes that through the process of Tribes, we can reach all learners and instill a feeling of safety that is essential in order for learning to take place.

Joanne and David agreed that in order for cooperative learning to be successful, students must first be a part of a strong, cohesive and supportive community. Joanne explained: “If kids can come into a warm, welcoming classroom environment, if the other students know their name and show that they value who they are as a person, that’s such an incredible foundation [for learning]” (Interview, Joanne, December 2014). David agreed that inclusion was a positive way to engage students and to also quickly create a classroom where all students feel valued and accepted. Joanne said that Tribes was a way to ensure that every child in the classroom felt as though they belonged and that they were safe in their learning environment. For David, Tribes
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was more a way to get his class working together as a team, whereas for Joanne it was the basis of her teaching as well as for her administrating as a principal.

As an administrator, Joanne had a whole-school approach to inclusion. For her inclusion only worked when the entire school was on board, including herself as the principal and all support staff that also worked in the building. As a school principal Joanne would model for her teaching staff what inclusion looked like in the classroom by engaging them in inclusive activities at staff meetings while also modeling practices during her time interacting with students. For Joanne modeling was critical for the successful implementation of inclusion in her school community. She described: “We tried to model for teachers at every opportunity, that’s the way we begin every teaching opportunity with kids so we began every staff meeting the same way with teachers. I modeled it, I believed in it and I encouraged teachers to do the same” (Interview, Joanne, December 2014). Joanne also described that deeply embedding inclusive practices into her school routines allowed for teachers to continually practice inclusion in their own classrooms. She explained that as a principal her daily goal was to model inclusive language for staff and students, while also providing staff with examples of how to be inclusive educators through modeling activities they could use in their classroom. Joanne described inclusion as a powerful tool you can use to shape behaviour and create a positive school community.

Impact of Cooperative Learning on Students

When discussing the use of cooperative learning on students on IEPs, it is immensely important to understand the impact this instructional strategy can have on these students. Both participants discussed the importance of having students with learning differences feel included in the classroom and feel as though their voice is being heard. Through the use of cooperative learning both participants agreed that their students on IEPs flourished in the classroom and
gained valuable life skills they could use in the future. However, the discussion did not only surround students on IEPs but also revolved around the impact on all students within the classroom. The findings for this theme will be presented in two sub-themes: impact on students on an IEP and the impact on all students.

On Students on Individual Education Plans

Both Joanne and David discussed that cooperative learning was an effective strategy for the inclusion of students on IEPs. They both discussed that the impacts this strategy could have for students on IEPs were endless, however in their experience both participants noted that the largest impacts they had seen included: instilling confidence, having a voice within the classroom and skill development.

For both David and Joanne, one of the main factors as to whether students on IEPs would benefit from cooperative learning was dependent on the classroom teacher. They explained that as long as the classroom teacher is integrating the student’s modified expectations into their role during cooperative learning activities, students on IEPs are more than capable of participating and having an active role in their group. David would explain it this way to his students: “You [students on IEPs] have to bring something to the table, you can’t just show up and expect someone to do it for you.” For my kids with special learning needs, I could adjust what was required in terms of preparation” (Interview, David, November 2014). David went on to discuss that if he was expecting the majority of the group to complete four to five facts in preparation for a group activity, he would just modify the expectation based upon his students IEP. But for David, it was about having the students working together that mattered, not about whether or not the students in the group were doing the exact same amount of work—and for students on IEPs this was a critical aspect of their learning: working with a group.
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For Joanne, the immediate benefits she would see in her students on IEPs were the reason she continually pushed her teachers to continue this work through her role as an administrator and now as a Tribes facilitator. She said that the positive feedback children receive during these types of activities help shape their behaviour in a powerful way. For her, cooperative learning makes sense for the inclusion of students on IEPs. For both David and Joanne, the impact of cooperative learning for students on IEPs was a huge motivating factor in making it work in the classroom. David suggested that for his students on IEPs cooperative learning was a way for them to learn from others and to also build upon the skills they may be working towards on their IEP. David went on to explain: “Students who were reluctant to talk have the floor just like everyone else. He has the structure that allows him to have a distinct part, he doesn’t have to worry about anything else, and he just has to worry about his part in it” (Interview, David, November 2014). For David, this was a critical impact on students with IEPs. He wanted those students to participate and feel what it is like to be heard by their peers.

Another impact that cooperative learning had for students on IEPs was instilling confidence in their abilities and strengths in the classroom. David and Joanne were both adamant that students on IEPs were much more confident and accepted when they were included in cooperative learning activities. For Joanne, Tribes was a large part of creating this accepting and safe climate. She explained: “But what I love about Tribes is mutual respect being one of the four agreements. If you work on that every single day, you know what respect looks like, then you make those kids [on IEPs] feel that they are valued and that their voice is heard” (Interview, Joanne, December 2014). David agreed that for students on IEPs, instilling confidence in them and hearing their voice in the classroom was huge. Joanne went on to say that for her, the
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confidence piece was the largest impact she saw for children on IEPs during cooperative learning activities. She explained:

They are going to take risks with their learning right. If they feel safe, if they feel valued and they are starting to build that self-confidence, they’re going to take some risks—probably risks they haven’t taken before. They are going to extend themselves and enhance their own learning. And growth and development too. The confidence piece is huge! (Interview, Joanne, December 2014)

Joanne felt that when you have an inclusive classroom, where all students feel safe and feel ready to learn that student’s confidence will grow and their learning will flourish. For her, cooperative learning and an inclusive classroom helps students feel better about themselves and in return impacts their learning.

Similarly, David agreed that cooperative learning created an environment where students on IEPs would benefit from the strengths of others and also enhance their own learning. For him, having students on IEPs participate during group activities was essential to having them feel a part of the community. He discussed that in some classrooms, where cooperative learning does not happen; students on IEPs are being sequestered into working alone for the majority of their school day. For students, this experience has a negative impact on their perception of their place in the classroom community. For David, cooperative learning was a way to ensure that students on IEPs felt as though they belonged. David went on to explain: “Students with special needs are being looked after in classrooms where cooperative learning is taking place—they are contributing and they are being heard” (Interview, David, November 2014).

On All Students in the Classroom

Cooperative learning does not only impact students on IEPs within the classroom, it also impacts all students within the classroom environment in a number of different ways. Both Joanne and David discussed the impact they have seen on students in classrooms where
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cooperative learning takes place. The largest impact that both participants discussed for all students within the classroom included: feeling a part of a community, accountability and academic impact.

As both participants are Tribes trainers and used Tribes as their method of inclusion within their own classrooms, they both described Tribes as a large influence on the impact that being a part of a community had on their students. For all students in the classroom, feeling part of a community where they had a voice and where they were respected was a huge factor in the classroom dynamic. For Joanne, Tribes was the way in which teachers in her school were able to make every student feel as though they belonged. She discussed that the impact of inclusion through cooperative learning on students by describing that sense of belonging and their ability to feel like a member of the community. David, on the other hand, explained, while his initial interest in cooperative learning was purely for academic benefits, throughout his teaching career he relied on creating a community in order for those academic benefits to be impactful.

Both David and Joanne brought up the accountability piece of cooperative learning in a variety of different areas. Accountability to your learning is a huge piece of cooperative learning and allows students to understand their responsibility to participate in their group by contributing positively. David shared: “The kids knew that when they did something together, that each individual child would be accountable for his/her work and that at some point they would be accountable without the help of the rest of the group” (Interview, David, November 2014). David went on to explain that for him, having students understand the accountability and then to follow through with their duties in a group setting were impactful in their learning. For David, if the accountability piece was not present during your cooperative learning activities then there was no value in what you were doing with your students. It was essential for him that the
accountability was built into everything that was done in groups, as it had a large impact on students’ motivation to participate and buy into what was happening in the classroom. While Joanne agreed that accountability had an impact on student engagement, David was very adamant that it was a skill students would benefit from in the long term.

As teachers, it is important that the instructional strategies you are implementing in your classroom are benefiting and impacting your students academically. Cooperative learning takes a lot of teacher preparation in order for students to understand their role and also to understand that their peers were there to assist in their learning. Joanne and David both discussed the academic benefits of using cooperative learning in the classroom. For Joanne, it was about concept attainment and having students retain the concepts they have learned in the classroom. Cooperative learning for her, impacted student retention and therefore allowed teachers to get through more curriculum throughout the year without having to reteach concepts. Joanne also described that through cooperative learning she saw students learning about their strengths and areas of need in a safe environment. She explained: “When you talk about multiple intelligences—kids will learn, well I have different strengths in this area. And that too is an important part of inclusion, recognizing that all of us come with different strengths and that we all contribute in different ways” (Interview, Joanne, December 2014).

For David, the academic impact of cooperative learning for students was the reason he began implementing this teaching strategy early in his career. David believes that when students are helping other student learn concepts they are gaining more academically then when they are working on their own. Through cooperative learning activities, David was able to draw out his students’ strengths and areas of need and then plan his programming around making sure each student received what they needed most. To him that is what cooperative learning is all about. He
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explained: “My standards for my students are high, even for those with special needs. To me, that is the beauty of cooperative learning—everyone can do it. You can operate at whatever levels you want, you’re still participating and you’re still contributing” (Interview, David, November 2014). For both David and Joanne, cooperative learning was an effective teaching strategy that allowed them as educators to get the best out of their kids and watch them flourish academically.

**Resources Available to Teachers**

In order for cooperative learning to occur and be successful in a classroom, teachers require support and resources that will inform their teaching practices. When integrating students on IEPs into cooperative learning activities, teachers must be equipped with the knowledge and understanding of how to best meet their students needs within the classroom. Two sub-themes that emerged during the discussion surrounding resources for teachers were support from the administration and instructional resources that teachers found useful when implementing cooperative learning in the classroom.

**Support from Administration**

As an administrator herself, Joanne had a lot of experience in supporting her teachers through their short term and long term planning. For Joanne, the most important thing she did for her teachers was model what a cooperative school looked like, as well as modeling inclusive practices throughout her administrative duties. She believed that her dedication and belief in both inclusion and cooperative learning practices allowed her staff to be successful in their implementation. Joanne discussed that had she not been a model for what their lesson plans should look like, i.e. including Johnson and Johnson’s five elements, her staff may have been more reluctant to continue with this instructional strategy.
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Joanne also discussed that in order for cooperative learning to be properly implemented and successfully integrate all students, her teachers required ample amount of planning time. Joanne stressed the importance of individual planning time as well as planning time with support staff and grade partners. She explained: “We provided a lot of release time for teaching partners and grade levels to get together to plan. Because that is so critical. They have so much to share, but really during the instructional day who has time for that?” (Interview, Joanne, December 2014). Joanne described that what she found worked best for her teachers and what truly allowed them to dive into cooperative learning was the release and planning time. For Joanne’s schools, the support from the administration was crucial for teachers to continue doing effective teaching using cooperative learning. David, on the other hand, was not as supported by his administration as he would like to have been throughout his teaching career. He did mention however, that when his principal was supportive of cooperative learning at the school where he was teaching, he found it easier to implement cooperative learning in his classroom.

Instructional Resources

Joanne and David both offered suggestions of instruction resources that they found to be useful when implementing cooperative learning in the classroom. Both of them described relying on the Tribes textbook by Jeanne Gibbs. As both participants were Tribes trainers, this book was very useful to them during their time in the classroom. Joanne also recommended the resource Beyond Monet, written by Barrie Bennett and Carol Rolheiser. Joanne described this as the resource she would equip her own teachers with at the beginning of the school year. She described that it was the most useful resource for her staff and that they were always referring to it during staff meetings. David mentioned that he relied on cooperative learning gurus, such as Barrie Bennett and Carol Rolheiser, as well as Robert Slaven and Bruce Joyce. Both participants described the necessity of understanding cooperative learning and familiarizing oneself with
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practices on a regular basis in order to be an effective instructor using this instructional technique.

**Challenges and Barriers to Implementation**

While cooperative learning is an effective teaching strategy in regards to academic benefits and the social climate of the classroom, it is not a widely used teaching strategy in today’s classrooms. Both participants of this research study expressed that throughout their teaching careers they faced barriers that they needed to overcome in order to continue teaching the way they believed to be the most effective.

**Barriers Educators Face in Regards to Implementation**

Joanne and David have differing concerns when it came to the barriers that teachers face when attempting to implement cooperative learning into their everyday teaching. For Joanne, the barriers arose when trying to get all of her teachers on board with implementing cooperative learning effectively in the classroom and sustaining it over time. Both Joanne and David discussed that the time and effort required to be an effective implementer drove a lot of his colleagues to abandon the strategy.

As an administrator, Joanne was always concerned with how to make cooperative learning a sustainable teaching strategy from year to year. For her, she needed to find ways to maintain teachers engagement with this instructional strategy and consistently remind them of its importance in the classroom. She explained: “For me the challenge was how do you keep it going? I think humans are interesting. I think we get a little stale, and we need to push ourselves differently and sometimes that takes effort, and some people aren’t willing to put the effort in” (Interview, Joanne, December 2014). Joanne was concerned with how her teachers were using cooperative learning in the classroom and if they were using it effectively. For her, she
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understood the benefits of this teaching strategy in the classroom and believed that by giving teachers the resources they needed in order to implement it that they would see the benefits as well. Joanne’s teachers in her schools were all Tribes trained and used Tribes as their model for inclusion. Joanne discussed that, while teachers at the schools understood how to properly implement this strategy, they sometimes would get caught up in the curriculum and Ministry expectations.

Both Joanne and David discussed that the barrier they both encountered during their time in the classroom was the amount of time and effort cooperative learning required. As Joanne previously mentioned, many of her teachers just did not want to exert the added effort it would take to coordinate this teaching strategy. For Joanne it was about the learning that would come out of this instructional strategy and time was just a component of that. Some of her staff members understood the benefits and were willing to put the work in, while others were not. She explained:

You have people who are really good at that stuff [planning] and people who it takes more effort and they can’t be bothered. And that’s sad, people who think it takes too long when they don’t get that learning is so deeply enhanced for the kids when you give them the chance to interact in the way that they can in cooperative groups. (Interview, Joanne, December 2014)

The benefits for student learning was one of the reasons that Joanne continuously asked her staff to put in the effort to run a program where cooperative learning was integrated into daily teaching. She described that the classrooms where this type of instruction occurred were also the classrooms where rich learning happened as well. But, there were always teachers who would not put in their best effort, which created a barrier for effective implementation.
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Similarly, David discussed that while he would attempt to collaborate with his teaching partners, it was difficult to collaborate when they were not implementing the same instructional strategy as he was. Like Joanne, David mentioned that many of the teachers he worked with were caught up in the academic models that were presented each year by the Ministry. He discussed that there was always a new initiative happening that required teachers to change their teaching style. While David would incorporate the new model into his pre-existing cooperative learning structure, he found that the majority of his colleagues would abandon what they had already accomplished with cooperative learning. For David, investing the time in this strategy was worth what you received in return from your students; however for the majority of the people he worked with during his career the time it took to establish the norms in the classroom was too great.

Overcoming Barriers

As a beginning teacher implementing cooperative learning into your classroom can be a difficult feat with little to no support from colleagues. Both David and Joanne are familiar with having to overcome the barriers that attempt to stop them from implementing cooperative learning. Both participants credit perseverance as their solution to overcoming the barriers standing in your way as an educator who wishes to implement cooperative learning.

Joanne described that if you continue working at implementing this strategy in your classroom, you will see a definite response from those teaching around you. Colleagues will take notice of what you are doing and seeing the value of this strategy in the classroom. Joanne remained adamant that action is what speaks and when your students are excelling academically and socially people will notice your efforts. She explained that the key was building inclusion into every lesson and sharing the strategy so other educators see the value in it. Similarly, David
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also described persisting through the school year modeling best practice and having your colleagues become intrigued by watching what your classroom is doing. The social and academic benefits are there, and as educators we understand that this method does work when implemented effectively. If you want this strategy to work in your classroom you must dedicate the time, effort and planning that it requires, and if you do you will see a beautiful community emerge within your classroom.
Inclusion Through Cooperative Learning

Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction
In today’s modern classroom, teachers have more of a responsibility than ever to provide students with individualized instruction, while still providing them with authentic social learning opportunities. This study set out to answer the question: how are teachers designing lessons using cooperative learning strategies in ways that include and are responsive to the educational needs of students on Individual Education Plans in mainstream classrooms? The answers I have received from the completion of this study have affected my beliefs as an educator immensely. It was extremely gratifying to learn that an instructional strategy you wish to employ in your own classroom provides students with a multitude of social and academic benefits.

The findings discussed in the previous chapter, coupled with the information in the literature review, indicate that for students on IEPs cooperative learning has a deep impact both academically and socially. The findings also indicate that teachers face challenges while trying to implement this practice, and understanding the fundamentals of cooperative learning and using them effectively is the key to success. This final chapter will discuss cooperative learning as an inclusive classroom practice, compare and contrast the findings to what the literature says about this topic, how this research can inform the educational community as well as limitations of this research study and the need for further research on this topic.

Cooperative Learning as an Inclusive Practice
In order for a classroom to be an inclusive environment, all students need to feel welcomed and represented within the classroom. Cooperative learning does exactly this—it allows all students to be included in classroom activities and allows all students to participate on an equal level while still receiving their individual instruction. Cooperative learning is not the only
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instructional strategy available to educators to foster inclusion. There are a multitude of strategies that can be implemented into a classroom that effectively instructs students while still being inclusive to students with learning differences. Cooperative learning however brings in an aspect of inclusion that other strategies do not. It provides students with the opportunity to have a defined role, share their viewpoints with their peers and always have a place in the classroom community. Cooperative learning also promotes student achievement and social skill attainment.

When working in cooperative groups, students are attending to both academic and social skills. For students on IEPs, these social skills are crucial to their inclusion within the classroom. Both participants in this study reiterated that cooperative learning allowed students on IEPs to have their voice and ideas heard by their peers. In terms of an inclusive environment, cooperative learning allowed all students to connect with one another and relate to each other through these activities. Gillies and Ashman (2002) suggested that cooperative learning allowed students with learning differences to communicate and relate to their peers on a level they could not achieve through teacher-student interaction. The participants of this research study also discussed that cooperative learning provided all students with the opportunity to take risks with their learning, try new things and engage with their peers in a meaningful way.

A common theme between the literature review and the findings of this research study was the impact that cooperative learning can have on students with learning differences. Both participants discussed that having students on IEPs included in cooperative learning activities helped them to feel part of the community and they were more engaged in their learning. The participants discussed that the increase in self-esteem was also a major benefit of using this instructional strategy for students on IEPs. Jenkins and colleagues (2003) also suggested that students on IEPs gain social benefits from cooperative activities, including increased confidence.
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and self-esteem. In classrooms where cooperative learning takes place, emotional safety is an essential component to achieving the social and academic benefits as discussed in both the literature and by the participants of this study. Cross and Walker-Knight (1997) suggest that cooperative learning may provide students with a safe environment where they are more comfortable sharing their ideas and participating. In her experience, Joanne also described the safety of the classroom community as essential for student learning. She described students on IEPs, and students in general by saying that safety was needed in order for students to feel willing to participate in cooperative learning activities. This inclusiveness allowed students to feel valued in their classroom and therefore be more inclined to participate and have their voice heard.

When students have the social capabilities of participating in a cooperative learning activity, the students will achieve academically. Jenkins and colleagues (2003) found that students with learning differences accomplish more through cooperative groups than by working individually. David also believed that the academic impacts of cooperative learning were very deep for all students as well. Cooperative learning allowed him to individualize instruction and draw out his student’s strengths by having them work in cooperative groups. Alternatively, Joanne also discussed the impact of concept attainment as the academic impact she saw as most beneficial through cooperative learning. Similarly, Gillies and Ashman (2000) discuss concept attainment as being an academic impact of cooperative learning. Students are able to learn concepts with peers and receive different perspectives on the same concept. Students who are on a modified curriculum receive higher-level thinking from their peers while still completing their learning goal. Cooperative learning has multiple academic and social benefits that are seen throughout the literature review and the findings of this research study.
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Instructional Strategies

The main purpose of this research study was to investigate the strategies in which teachers are using in order to implement cooperative learning in a classroom where there are students on Individual Education Plans who are included. Both the literature review and the findings presented in this research study discussed the numerous ways in which teachers can integrate cooperative learning into the classroom in order to attend to the educational needs of students on IEPs. Accountability, heterogeneous groupings and differentiation are the strategies that have been discussed in both the literature and by the participants.

Johnson and Johnson’s five basic elements were at the core of both the literature and strategies in which the participants discussed as being most effective in implementing cooperative learning. Using Johnson and Johnson’s (1999) five basic elements allows teachers to effectively differentiate instruction and hold students accountable to their learning within the group. Similarly, both participants in this study discussed accountability as being essential to having cooperative learning activities yield the academic and social results that are desired. Slavin (1992) points out that individual accountability is what increases academic achievement, which both participants agreed with during the interviews. Both participants discussed that when the accountability aspect was missing, students were less engaged in the cooperative activity.

Heterogeneous groupings incorporate students of different levels of academic achievement into the same cooperative group in order to enhance learning of all students in the group. For students on IEPs heterogeneous groupings allow students to learn from their peers and provide students with a richer learning environment. Various researchers have found that heterogeneous groupings promote an inclusive community and help students have a positive attitude towards students with learning differences, as well as promote acceptance (Emmer and
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Gerwels, 2002; Jenkins et. al 2003; Veenman et al. 2002). Both participants also discussed the importance of heterogeneous groupings when implementing cooperative learning. They mentioned that pairing your strong kids with your students on IEPs in order allows your students to scaffold their learning. Heterogeneous groupings create a dynamic in the classroom where all students are working with one another and are voicing their opinions while still learning from one another. For the participants heterogeneous groupings allowed them to differentiate instruction while still maintaining the concept being taught to the whole group.

Differentiation of instruction is key when working with students on IEPs, as they are working on modified curriculum expectations. Differentiation allows educators to provide individualized instruction for students while still teaching a specific concept. Goor and Schwenn (1993) suggested that teachers could tailor cooperative learning activities to the needs of their students by structuring them appropriately. Coupled with Johnsons’ (1999) five basic elements, teachers are able to create specific expectations for individual students in order to meet their educational needs. Both participants also discussed that differentiation is another key element when incorporating students on IEPs into a cooperative learning activity. The end goal for all students in cooperative learning tasks is for them to leave the task with more knowledge than they entered it with. Differentiating so that all students get what they need in cooperative learning is essential for this strategy to work for everyone, especially our students on IEPs.

Implications for the Education Community

This research study was conducted on a particular topic that was of interest to myself as a new classroom teacher, however there are many implications that can be attributed to the education community as a whole. As the findings of this study show there are a number of ways to include students on IEPs into cooperative learning activities and the impact is deeply
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meaningful. For educators, it is important to understand that cooperative learning is a rich instructional strategy that allows them to be a facilitator of student learning rather than be the source of all information. As a facilitator, educators are able to observe student learning and engage with students on a different level. Students engage with one another in a structured way and are able to see concepts from different perspectives. Understanding the perspective of someone else allows other students to enhance their own learning of a particular concept by seeing different viewpoints.

Cooperative learning is an instructional strategy that can be impactful to all students in a classroom community, not only to students on IEPs. For students on IEPs, cooperative learning is impactful particularly in terms of confidence and participation. For classroom teachers, this is a compelling reason to implement cooperative learning in their classrooms. For students on IEPs, who already may feel marginalized based on their learning differences, cooperative learning provides an equitable opportunity to participate and have their voice heard by their peers. This point is the biggest implication of this research, the impact on our students with learning differences. This type of instructional strategy provides an opportunity for all students to feel represented in the classroom and engage with their peers in a way they may not have a chance to with other types of instruction. Student learning is enhanced through cooperative learning and the meaning students can gain is very impactful.

Cooperative learning is not an instructional strategy that can be implemented without the understanding of its components. Understanding Johnson and Johnson’s five elements is essential to creating meaningful cooperative learning experiences. Teachers must understand the basic principals of cooperative learning before implementing it in their classrooms. The
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The following are recommendations that educators who wish to implement cooperative learning in their classroom should consider from the implications of this study:

- Build a classroom community where all learners feel valued, heard and represented. Cooperative learning only works when that foundation of community and safety is in place.

- Add in the accountability aspect to all of your cooperative learning activities, have students become accountable individually as well as to their group members.

- Persevere through the challenges in regards to implementing cooperative learning in your classroom. This instructional strategy provides students with rich learning opportunities that create deeper knowledge acquisition and engage all students.

- Ensure that students on IEPs understand their role within the group and also understand their accountability to their group members.

- Discuss the expectations for cooperative activities with all students to ensure that students are aware of their accountability and role within the group.

While I have mentioned before that cooperative learning is not the only instructional strategy that effectively includes students on IEPs, it is a strategy that teaches students accountability and responsibility for their own learning. These traits are essential for student success in higher education as well as success in the working world. For students on IEPs these traits will help them to achieve their goals and take ownership of their learning. These skills are invaluable for students and should be considered when instructing students in the classroom.
**Limitations of the Research Process and Further Study**

This Master of Teaching Research Paper had a few limitations that hampered my ability as a researcher to conduct a thorough investigation into this type of educational phenomena. Firstly, there were a limited number of research participants. While each participant were well experienced on the topic and provided numerous findings for this research study, the low number of participants limits the generalizability of the research to the educational community as a whole. Due to the constraints on the number of participants, the results of this research paper read more as a narrative of two individuals with a similar experience, although the data collected on each participant warranted findings that were beneficial to the purpose of this study.

A second limitation to this study is the inability to conduct participant observation in classrooms where cooperative learning including students on IEPs were occurring. Conducting participant observation in classrooms would have provided a first-hand look at what instructional strategies teachers were employing as well as the reactions and engagement of students. If I had been able to conduct research in the classroom there would have been an opportunity to create a longitudinal study of the achievement of these students over a designated course of time. However, due to the time constraints of this study as well as the limitations in regards to data collection this was not possible. Time constraints were another limitation to this study. As this study included interviews that were about 60 minutes in length there was a limited amount of information I was able to collect from my participants. While the questions I used in my interview protocol (appendix B) generated rich discussion and findings, the time constraint did not allow the participants to elaborate further on their experience.

Future research on this topic should include a look into academic achievement outcomes for students on IEPs while participating in cooperative learning activities. I believe that educators
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would be more likely to use this instructional strategy if there was quantitative data to coincide with the literature on this topic. There is a tendency in education to follow practices that enhance student achievement and that provide school boards with quantitative data in the forms of improved grades as evidence. Research should also focus on how to provide assistance for teachers using this type of instruction in the classroom, whether that be research on the types of learning environments cooperative learning works best in, or physical resources such as literature that can aid teachers in providing effective cooperative instruction. It was discussed that, while teachers may have the best of intentions when incorporating cooperative learning into the classroom many of them do not have the appropriate understanding of the myriad of ways to implement it effectively.

Conclusion

In summary, this research paper has solidified for me the importance of making students on IEPs feel valued and heard within the classroom community. Both the findings presented in this study as well as the literature on this topic have indicated to me that this type of instructional strategy significantly impacts all students in the classroom and not just our students on IEPs. As an educator, providing students with authentic, equitable and impactful learning opportunities are at the heart of my philosophy of education.

This research study enabled me to use this instructional strategy in my final practicum with students on IEPs. Using the knowledge I gained from this research study I implemented cooperative learning activities in my practicum classroom and watched students engage in rich learning. Students on IEPs were included in the community and participated using their modified criteria. Similar to what both David and Joanne described in the findings chapter of this study, I observed my students on IEPs having their voice heard in the classroom, providing rich
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eexamples and demonstrating their knowledge in a variety of different ways. Providing my
students on IEPs with opportunities to learn alongside their peers while maintaining their
modified goals allowed me to be a more effective instructor. I was able to observe student
learning as a facilitator and also spend more time working with small groups of students. This
research paper and implementing cooperative learning in my own practice has shown me the
importance of understanding what works best for your students. Classrooms where cooperative
learning takes place are engaging, inclusive and an environment conducive to rich learning. That
is the type of classroom I can only hope to have of my own in the future.
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References


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CenterSource Systems, LLC.


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Appendices

Appendix A: 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 Inclusive Education and Cooperative Learning for the purposes of a 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.__________________. My research supervisor is ____________________. 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: Sarah Lawther

Email: sarah.lawther@mail.utoronto.ca
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Instructor’s Name: ____________________________________________
Phone number: ___________________ Email: ____________________

Research Supervisor’s Name: __________________________________
Phone #: _______________________ Email: ______________________

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 Sarah Lawther and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: _________________________________________________

Name (printed): ____________________________________________

Date: ___________________________
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Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Background Information:

1. How long have you been teaching, and what grades have you taught during that time?
2. Do you have any additional qualifications? If so, in what areas?
3. What is your experience level working with students on Individual Education Plans?

Beliefs Surrounding Inclusion:

1. What are your thoughts about the development of Individual Education Plans?
2. How do you view inclusion in your classroom or school?
3. What is your experience level working with students on Individual Education Plans?
4. What actions have you taken or do you take to establish a safer, more inclusive community within the classroom and school?
5. What challenges have you experienced in regards to establishing inclusive practices within your classroom or school? How did you respond to those challenges?
6. In what ways have you facilitated or have been involved in collaboration with colleagues to develop small group cooperative learning methods?
7. What is the most important factor to consider when creating an inclusive classroom community?

Cooperative Learning:

1. What experiences have you had related to initiating and implementing cooperative learning within your classroom or school? What courses or workshops have you taken that assisted you to more effectively implement cooperative learning?
2. Do you provide workshops for other teachers? If yes, what workshops do you provide and how long have you been doing those workshops?
3. What is your perceived impact for learning for student’s on IEPs who engage in cooperative learning?
4. What is your experience with cooperative learning? Which process do you prescribe to (i.e. Tribes, Johnson and Johnson, etc.)?
5. What does cooperative learning look like in a classroom when including students on IEPs?
6. What instructional methods do you find most useful when including students on IEPs in cooperative learning opportunities? Why are they useful?
7. What is your advice for a new teacher who wishes to create a cooperative learning environment in their practice?