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# Principals' Attitudes Toward Inclusion: Including Students with Autism in Elementary Classrooms

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PRINCIPALS' ATTITUDES TOWARD INCLUSION:  
INCLUDING STUDENTS WITH AUTISM IN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania

May 2012

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Title: Principals' Attitudes Toward Inclusion: Including Students with Autism in Elementary Classrooms

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This qualitative study sought to identify the attitudes of elementary principals toward the inclusion of students with autism in regular education classrooms and the relationship between their attitudes and their placement recommendations for children with autism. The perspectives of elementary principals (administrators with a minimum of three years of experience) were gathered through semi-structured interviews. This research was designed to (a) identify the concerns of elementary principals regarding the inclusion of students with autism in meeting the academic standards in the general curriculum, (b) understand how personal and professional experiences and professional development influence elementary principals' concerns relating to the inclusion of students with autism, and (c) identify attitudes of elementary principals concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities versus the inclusion of students with autism in regular education classrooms.

The purposive sample for this study consisted of six elementary principals from school districts in western Pennsylvania. Prior to the formal study, the researcher piloted the interview protocol with two elementary principals outside of the formal participant pool. The participants' feedback provided evidence of the

study's reliability and validity. Following the success of the pilot study, the formal study was conducted and its data underwent analysis.

Participants were asked a series of questions pertaining to students with general disabilities and then students with autism. In addition, participants were asked to make placement recommendations based on scenario situations depicting students with autism. Results were analyzed and it was determined that the most noteworthy factor in predicting a positive attitude toward the inclusion of children with disabilities and less restrictive placement recommendations for children with autism was the principal's belief that children with autism could successfully be included in a regular education classroom.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thanks to the six elementary principals who participated in this study. I appreciate their openness and willingness to talk with me about their experiences with inclusion and autism.

Finally, I would like to thank my family – my husband, Scot, my son, Cade, and my daughter, Riley. Your encouragement and patience was so important to me throughout this process. I appreciate your love and support and have needed both to accomplish this goal. Don't forget to go after your own dreams....as Wayne Gretzky said, "You miss 100% of the shots you don't take." Make sure that you go for it!

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# CHAPTER 1

## THE PROBLEM

### **Introduction**

Autism will be diagnosed in more than 25,000 children in the United States this year, possibly more than new pediatric cases of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), diabetes, and cancer combined. Statistics indicate that the incidence of autism is increasing. Today, the spectrum of autistic disorders (or Autism Spectrum Disorder, ASD) is now acknowledged as a set of common developmental disorders, with an estimated prevalence of about 1 in every 110 children in the United States (ADDM; Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network Surveillance Year 2006 Principal Investigators, 2009). A diagnosis of ASD is based on descriptions and observations of behavior. Although there is much evidence that autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder with a very strong genetic component, there is not yet a valid biomarker or biological test (Abrahams & Geschwind, 2008). The greatest risk factor for ASD is being male; autism occurs about four times more often in boys than girls. Intellectual disability frequently co-occurs with ASD, although the percentage of co-occurrences has reduced from 75% to 50% over recent decades (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000). Due to the increase of diagnosed children with autism entering our schools, principals need to provide an environment that will offer appropriate instruction for these students.

What is the proper instruction for children with autism? That depends on the specific diagnosis of the student. The characteristics of autism vary from

child to child. One individual with autism does not necessarily display all of the characteristics. Some common characteristics are: communication difficulties, trouble with social interactions, repetitive or stereotyped interests or activities, and over or under sensitivity to common aspects of the environment. Autism is defined by a certain set of behaviors and is a “spectrum disorder” that affects individuals differently and to varying degrees (Autism Society, 2008b). The autistic spectrum includes five disorders including Autism, Asperger’s Disorder, Rett’s Syndrome, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified. According to the National Institute of Mental Health,

All children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) demonstrate deficits in 1) social interaction, 2) verbal and nonverbal communication, and 3) repetitive behaviors or interests. These children will often have unusual responses to sensory experiences. Each of these symptoms runs the gamut from mild to severe. They will present in each individual child differently. Each child will display communication, social, and behavioral patterns that are individual but fit into the overall diagnosis of ASD.

(National Institute of Mental Health, 2008).

As with all children, children with autism are unique. As stated above, autism can range from mild to severe. Therefore, schools need to find ways of providing instruction to fit the special needs of each student with autism.

The word autism comes from the Greek word “autos,” meaning “self.” The term describes conditions in which a person is removed from interactions with

others – thus, the individual with autism isolates himself from others. In the early 1900s, a Swiss psychiatrist, Eugen Bleuler, started using the term autism to describe a group of symptoms of schizophrenia. In the 1940s, researchers in the United States began to describe children with emotional or social problems as being autistic. “Leo Kanner, a doctor from Johns Hopkins University, used it to describe the withdrawn behavior of several children he studied” (Autism Spectrum Disorders Health Center, 2008). In his 1943 report, *Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact*, Kanner described the remarkable behavioral similarities of 11 children (1943). At that time, he introduced the label early infantile autism. At about the same time, a German scientist, Hans Asperger, identified a similar condition that’s now named after him, Asperger’s Disorder.

When it comes to providing special education services for children with disabilities in public schools, there are two principal ways of thinking: those who support mainstreaming and those who support inclusion. Historically, mainstreaming refers to the selective placement of special education students in one or more regular education classes. Simons, Fuchs, and Fuchs (1991) stated that “Educating students with learning disabilities in mainstream contexts creates an instructional dilemma for where there are no easy or straightforward solutions” (p. 354). A heterogeneous mainstream classroom can be quite demanding for teachers. Some of these students are “mainstreamed” for only part of the day. For the rest of the school day, their education is provided in special education classes. With inclusion, each child is educated, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he would otherwise attend. The

supporters of mainstreaming believe that a student should earn his way out of the special education class and into the regular education class. On the other hand, the supporters of inclusion believe that a student should be placed in the most appropriate setting, but should be provided with support services as needed to help him be successful. If a time comes when that student cannot be successful, then he should be moved out of the regular education classroom. He would then be placed in a special education classroom so that his needs could be met. There are two federal laws that govern education of children with disabilities – the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Neither requires inclusion, but both require that a significant effort be made to find an inclusive placement (Wisconsin Education Association Council, 2007).

According to the United States Department of Education, “IDEA is a law ensuring services to children with disabilities throughout the nation” (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide education to American students with disabilities. This federal law guarantees that children with disabilities are provided with a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Educators must determine what is most appropriate for each student. Whenever possible, all students should be included and educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Thus, the students with disabilities should receive their education alongside their typical peers in regular classrooms. Only when it has been determined that the student is not achieving as he should is it appropriate to move him from the regular education classroom



to a special education classroom. By law, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team decides on the educational program and placement for an individual student that is determined to qualify for special education services. The IEP team is made up of the child's parents/ guardians; at least one special education teacher of the child or special education provider; at least one regular education teacher of the child if the child is or may be participating in the regular education environment; an individual who can interpret the instructional implications of evaluation results such as a school psychologist; and other individuals (at the discretion of the parents or agency) who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the child, including related service personnel. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 "requires that a recipient of federal funds provide for the education of each qualified handicapped person in its jurisdiction with persons who are not handicapped to the maximum extent appropriate to the needs of the handicapped person" (Wisconsin Education Association Council, 2007).

A student with a disability must be placed in a regular education class until he demonstrates that he is unable to succeed in that setting with support services. In addition, in 2004, the "Gaskin vs. Pennsylvania Department of Education" case was decided. The class-action lawsuit was filed in 1994 by a group of families and advocacy groups on behalf of a group of children with disabilities against the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). Under the settlement, PDE was directed to develop a series of steps designed to assist school districts in providing appropriate services and supports to special

education students placed for all or part of the day in regular education classrooms ("Gaskin Settlement," 2008). The federal law and PDE policy require that each local education agency (LEA) and IEP team make appropriate educational placement decisions for students. Therefore, children who have been diagnosed with autism should not be excluded from regular education classrooms merely because of their label. An IEP team must make the placement decision that best suits each student. And when making those placement decisions, the IEP team is certain to remember that special education is a service and not a place.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Principals provide the drive and encouragement to make inclusive education come to pass. In Pennsylvania, it is the school principal's duty to ensure that the guidelines under IDEA and PDE policy are being implemented. School administrators are to understand the roles of each of the professionals responsible for providing education to each and every student. According to the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Initiative, there are three core standards for principals:

- 1) a principal has the knowledge and skills to think and plan strategically, creating an organizational vision around personalized student success; 2) the leader is grounded in standards-based systems theory and design and is able to transfer that knowledge to his/her job as the architect of standards-based reform in the school; and 3) the leader knows how to

access and use appropriate data to inform decision-making at all levels of the system. (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2006)

As a result, a principal must develop a plan to ensure success for all students, even those with disabilities such as autism. The attitude of the principal would seemingly have an effect on the faculty and staff of an elementary school. This study is about elementary principals' attitudes regarding inclusion of children with autism in Pennsylvania public schools. Does a principal's attitude regarding students with autism effect his/her placement recommendation for those students? The opposing forces of legislation that protects the rights of students with disabilities and the possibly negative attitudes of school administrators concerning those rights must be investigated and analyzed so that changes can be made (if necessary).

### **Purpose of the Study**

In an inclusive school, the general education program does not abandon the responsibility for students with special needs. In its place, the general education program should work cooperatively with special education to provide a quality educational program for all students. The purpose of this study was to identify the attitudes of elementary principals regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities and the relationship between those attitudes and the placement recommendations of students diagnosed with autism.

## **Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the concerns of elementary principals regarding the inclusion of students with autism in the general curriculum?
2. What are the concerns of elementary principals regarding all students meeting the academic standards?
3. How do personal and professional prior experiences and professional development influence elementary principals' concerns?
4. What is the relationship between elementary principals' formal education and professional development experiences with students with autism and their attitude toward the inclusion of students with autism?
5. What is the relationship between an elementary principal's attitude toward the inclusion of students with disabilities and the principal's recommendation for placement for a child with a profile that depicts a child with autism?
6. What is the relationship between an elementary principal's personal characteristics and the principal's attitudes toward inclusion of children with autism?

## **Significance of the Study**

In the United States, 1 out of every 110 children is born with autism each year. Government statistics suggest the prevalence rate of autism is increasing 10 to 17 percent annually. There is no established explanation for this increase, although improved diagnosis and environmental influences are two reasons that

are often considered (Autism Speaks, 2008). Lord and Bishop (2010) are concerned with the increase in the prevalence of autism. Concerning educational policy implications, they have stated:

Policy implications of the prevalence rates must start with the effect of the sheer numbers of children estimated to have ASD. These numbers equal the numbers for schizophrenia and exceed the numbers for most major specific developmental disabilities. For educational purposes, they mean that most elementary schools with a population of 500 children will have 4 or 5 children with ASD. A school district with 10,000 children and adolescents would be expected to serve just short of 100 children with ASD. This is a very large number, given the services required. Because of the heterogeneity of the population, it is also a difficult number for which to plan. For example, the five children in one elementary school could range in age from 5 to 12, in language level from nonverbal to verbally fluent, in IQ from profound intellectual disability to superior intelligence, and in challenging behavior from none to highly disruptive. Even if the school created an “autism” resource class, a single program would not be appropriate for the majority of the children because of the range in the ages and developmental levels.

So, principals must face the reality that an increasing number of students with autism will be entering elementary school.

For this study, the researcher interviewed six elementary principals who work in school districts in western Pennsylvania. Initially, demographic data was

collected from each of the principals via an electronic survey. Next, each principal was interviewed individually. The researcher was granted permission from Ms. Horrocks to use a modified version of her questionnaire during the interview sessions (Appendix A). Ms. Horrocks surveyed random principals from all school levels. With this research, only elementary principals were interviewed.

This is a worthwhile study because principals in Pennsylvania are going to be faced with more and more students who are identified with autism or an autism spectrum disorder and they will need to supervise the educational placement of each individual student. School administrators must be aware of their attitudes toward students with disabilities. The findings of this study could be used in future training programs for principals.

### **Definition of Terms**

Attitude: A mental position with regard to a fact or state (Merriam-Webster).

Autism: A variable developmental disorder that appears by age three and is characterized by impairment of the ability to form normal social relationships, by impairment of the ability to communicate with others, and by stereotyped behavior (Merriam-Webster).

Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE): To be appropriate, education programs for students with disabilities must be designed to meet their individual needs to the same extent that the needs of nondisabled students are met (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Inclusion: The act or practice of including students with disabilities in regular school classes (Merriam-Webster).

Individualized Educational Plan (IEP): A personalized educational plan created for students who have been identified as having specific educational disabilities. An IEP is a team as well as an educational program. Working together, the IEP team ensures that the child receives the education and services necessary for progress and success (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2008).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): A federal law that was created to help ensure that children who have special needs, such as autism, are able to receive a free public school education that meets their needs (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2008).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2005).

Principal: A school administrator (or principal) is a person whose primary responsibility shall be to direct, operate, supervise, and administer the organizational and general activities of a school (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2012).

### **Research Design**

The sample population for this study was drawn from elementary principals with at least three years of experience who are employed at schools in

western Pennsylvania. Data was collected through face-to-face, telephone, and Skype interviews with participants in the study. Six elementary principals, from different school districts, were interviewed as part of this study.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Only public school elementary principals who work in school districts in western Pennsylvania were included in the sample for this study. Due to the regional similarities of the various school districts that are located in this region, these districts may have a common culture. Principals of non-public elementary schools were not included in the study. The results of the study were limited by the responding principals' accuracy in self-reporting.

### **Summary**

Elementary principals in Pennsylvania must face the reality that the number of students who are diagnosed with autism is increasing. Therefore, these administrators need to be prepared to make educational placement recommendations for students with autism. Are those principals more or less inclined to recommend inclusion for students with autism? Data was analyzed after the researcher completed the interviews from a purposive sample of Pennsylvania's elementary school principals to determine if these individuals were supportive of inclusion for students with disabilities, especially those students with autism.

This chapter examined the purpose of this study, the significance of this study, and the limitations of this study. Chapter 2 will investigate the history of autism, various treatments for autism, different educational practices associated



with autism, the inclusion movement, attitudes towards autism, and principals and special education.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to review the recent literature on the topic of autism and inclusion. Autism, from a physiological viewpoint, is a neurological anomaly that may preclude the body from properly receiving signals transmitted by the brain, resulting in misfires and disconnects (Stillman, 2007). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has stated that 1 in every 110 American children is born with an autism spectrum disorder. This variance has been studied for the past 69 years, since Leo Kanner first described 11 children he identified as having infantile autism (Kanner, 1943). This literature review includes an examination of the history of autism, various treatments, and educational practices associated with autism spectrum disorders. The review also explores the inclusion movement, especially the inclusion of students with autism in regular classrooms, and the role of the instructional leader or elementary principal.

#### **History of Autism**

Individuals who have been diagnosed with autism are found along a spectrum. This spectrum ranges from those persons with severe symptoms and mental retardation to those of average or higher intelligence whose symptoms of autism are relatively mild. To gain a better understanding of this disability, one needs to consider the history of autism.

In 1910, Eugene Bleuler, a Swiss psychiatrist, used the word “autismus” to describe individuals who withdrew from social interaction with others. Bleuler derived the word autism from the Greek word “autos,” which means “self.” He used autismus to define the symptoms of schizophrenia which is a mental disorder characterized by abnormalities in the perception or expression of reality. In the late 1930s, Hans Asperger, a physician with the University Children’s Hospital in Vienna, Austria, borrowed Bleuler’s term “autistic psychopaths” and included it in a lecture about child psychology. Asperger described boys in his practice as lacking nonverbal communication skills, demonstrating limited empathy with peers, and being physically awkward.

Autism is defined by a certain set of behaviors and is a “spectrum disorder” that affects individuals differently and to varying degrees (Autism Society, 2008b). The autistic spectrum includes five disorders including Autism, Asperger’s Disorder, Rett Syndrome, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified.

At about the same time, in 1943, Leo Kanner, a child psychiatrist at Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, was observing the behavior of 11 children who were exhibiting similar behaviors. According to Leon Eisenberg in the August 1981 issue of the *American Journal of Psychiatry*,

Dr. Kanner is best known for his delineation in 1943 of the syndrome he described as “autistic disturbances of affective contact” but later designated as early infantile autism. Michael Rutter has written, “The field of childhood psychoses is strewn

with descriptions of this or that syndrome which purport to represent some distinct entity. Most of these have passed into the sands of time, but one – a careful, clinical description of 11 children – remains as important today as when it first appeared... Nearly all the basic points made in the original paper have been amply confirmed by other workers.” Infantile autism is recognized as a diagnostic category in *DSM-III* in precisely the terms Leo Kanner used almost 40 years earlier. It is a remarkable tribute to clinical acuity that a perceptive and widely experienced observer could have recognized a distinct syndrome, previously unrecorded, and have sifted out essential from adventitious features in so accurate a fashion in the first report of its existence. (1981)

Thus, Kanner is attributed as being the first to diagnose children with autism.

In the 1960s, the term “refrigerator mothers” was used by Leo Kanner. Kanner claimed that autism was a result of the lack of attachment between a child and his parents, especially his mother. In the early 1970s, Bruno Bettelheim, a psychologist, promoted this theory and helped it gain more widespread popularity.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) provides diagnostic criteria for mental disorders. In 1952, the APA first published “The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders” (DSM). Since that time, there have been four revisions, with each publication including more disorders. In the current publication which was published in 1994, the “DSM-IV,” the diagnostic criteria for

autism is outlined under the heading for pervasive developmental disorders. The criteria are listed for the following distinctions under the autism spectrum:

Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Disorder, Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (including Atypical Autism), Rett Syndrome, and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder.

We now know that the theory of “refrigerator” parenting is not a valid explanation for the cause of autism. Modern research is beginning to focus on genetic factors; this seems to hold promise for potential explanations of this disability. There are many people today who believe that autism is a modern disorder. Others, who are aware of the history, realize that Kanner recognized specific symptoms of autism in the early 1940s.

Revisions are currently underway for the fifth edition of the DSM. There are proposals for changes in the diagnosis of neurodevelopmental disorders, including ASD. In a press release dated February 10, 2010, the American Psychiatric Association announced,

The American Psychiatric Association's draft proposed diagnostic criteria for the fifth edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) will include new categories for learning disorders and a single diagnostic category, “autism spectrum disorders” that will incorporate the current diagnoses of Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorder (Not Otherwise Specified).

It was also stated in the press release that the recommended DSM-V draft criteria for ASD include a new consideration of symptom severity related to the individual's degree of impairment. "The draft criteria also specify deficits in two categories: 1) social interaction and communication (e.g., maintaining eye-to-eye gaze, ability to sustain a conversation and peer-relations) and 2) the presence of repetitive behaviors and fixated interests and behaviors." Additionally, in recognition of the neurodevelopmental nature of the disorder, the newest revision of the DSM will require that symptoms begin in early childhood. Clinicians will have to take into account an individual's age, stage of development, intellectual abilities, and language level in making a diagnosis.

### **Treatments for Autism**

How do you treat the varying symptoms of autism? Most sources agree that early diagnosis and intervention with treatment is vital to assist young children in reaching their full potential. On its webpage, the Autism Society advises parents that "while there is no known cure for autism, there are treatment and education approaches that may reduce some of the challenges associated with the condition" (Autism Society, 2008a). Nevertheless, just as there is no one indicator or behavior that identifies individuals with ASD, there is also no single treatment that will be effective for all children on the spectrum. It is important that treatment begin as early as possible and be tailored to an individual child's unique strengths, weaknesses, and needs. Recently, parents of children with autism have become more vocal about advocating for services for their children. Shriver, Allen, and Matthews found this increased attention toward this

mysterious disability seems to have generated an increase of treatments “purported to ameliorate significantly the symptoms of autism, if not actually cure autism” (1999). The American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended four strategies to help children improve their overall functioning: 1) Behavioral training and management; 2) Specialized therapies; 3) Medicines; and 4) Community support and parent training. A treatment plan is typically developed in a collaborative effort to assist in the care of an autistic child. The child’s caretakers, caseworkers, teachers, and doctor build the treatment plan by recognizing the child’s needs and strengths and developing goals.

Since Leo Kanner first named this disability, numerous interventions and treatments for autism have been developed and they have varied dramatically. In the 1970s, according to Richard Simpson (2004), there were “remnants of psychodynamic and other interventions based on bonding and forming interpersonal relationships being used in a number of clinical settings with students with autism spectrum disorders” (p. 138). The idea behind these studies was that autism was an emotional reaction to environmental factors. The most noteworthy of these factors was the absence of maternal warmth and caring. This connects with Leo Kanner’s idea of refrigerator mothers. Some professionals favored the use of psychoanalysis and nondirective play therapy. As time passed though, these methods were mostly discredited and their effectiveness was questionable. The next favored treatment option was applied behavior analysis. Of course, at that time according to Simpson, “applied behavior analysis was used in a less positive and sophisticated fashion than today” (2004, p. 139).

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development currently recommends applied behavior analysis as one of the treatment methods for autism spectrum disorders. In the 1930s, B.F. Skinner developed an approach which was characterized by empirical observation of measurable behavior. He discovered that this measureable behavior could be predicted and controlled. Skinner used operant conditioning, the use of consequences to modify the occurrence and form a behavior, to alter behavior.

Siegel (2003) has reported that the use of applied behavioral analysis used with discrete trial training was pioneered in the late 1960s and 1970s by Dr. Ivar Lovaas at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). Lovaas had been trained as a Skinnerian behavioral psychologist and was interested in testing how applied behavior analysis methods would work with children who had severe developmental and behavioral disorders, including self-injurious behaviors. After a study in 1987, Lovaas stated,

Although serious problems remain for exactly defining autism or identifying its etiology, one encouraging conclusion can be stated: Given a group of children who show the kinds of behavioral deficits and excesses evident in our pretreatment measures, such children will continue to manifest similar severe psychological handicaps later in life unless subjected to intensive behavioral treatment that can indeed significantly alter that outcome.

Working with hospitalized children, he was able to stop self-injurious behaviors where others had failed (Siegel, 2003). Lovaas was so encouraged by these results that he developed a curriculum where clearly defined, repeated trials were



used to teach a targeted skill. Each learned skill was a building block to creating a normal catalog of behaviors.

In the late 1980s, Lovaas published results on some children with autism whom he had treated during the 1970s and early 1980s. This study made a big splash because although fewer than 20 children were treated intensively (an average of 40 hours per week) with his discrete trial training methods, half appeared to achieve very normalized outcomes, something that was not true when the same method was used much less intensively (an average of ten hours per week). Nothing like this had ever been reported before in the treatment of autism (Siegel, p. 313).

Today, a variety of applied behavior analysis programs for autistic children exist. And, among the variety of autism treatments, applied behavior analysis is the only treatment with objective, long-term research validating its benefits. Research has shown that interventions such as developmentally oriented behavioral treatment that involves parents and is combined with special education methods are likely to be the most beneficial (Rutter, 2006).

The second strategy that was recommended by the APA is the use of specialized therapies. Specialized therapies include speech, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. Due to the different needs of each child who is diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, these specialized therapies may differ. Speech therapy aids a child with developing skills in both speech and social situations. By gaining skills in these two areas, children learn to communicate more effectively. With occupational and physical therapy, children

can learn to improve both their fine and gross motor skills. Hopefully, these therapies will aid a child in becoming more coordinated. Children with autism may need assistance in one or more of these areas. There are trained therapists to aid in developing social skills, motor skills, and speech.

Some parents choose to use medication to help manage their child's autism spectrum disorder. This is the third strategy recommended by the APA for treating children with an autism spectrum disorder. Both non-pharmacologic and pharmacologic interventions can be used to manage behaviors attributed to autism (Rutter, 2006). In "The Role of Medication in the Management of Autistic Spectrum Disorders," Marlin Hoover states, "Over the past 50 years there has been substantial improvement in the manner in which psychoactive (mental health) medications work" (Obiakor, Rotatori, & Wahlberg, 2001, p. 255). These mental health medications are used to treat various conditions and behaviors related to autism. These conditions and behaviors include anxiety, depression, focus, hyperactivity, and obsessive-compulsiveness. Hoover reminds us that, "Which medication is selected depends on the professional judgment of the prescriber. The decisions about whether to medicate and which medication is appropriate are made in light of the individual's biological status and condition and with regard to the general health of the individual" (p. 261). Although there is no pharmacological cure for autism, "psychotropic medications have been helpful in targeting aggression, self-injury, affective instability, hyperactivity, hyper arousal, and anxiety" (Ray-Mihm, p. 103).

Dietary treatments have long been considered to be a major cause of hyperactivity and learning disabilities. In the 1960s, Dr. Ben Feingold developed a food elimination program to treat hyperactivity. Feingold believed that children with learning and behavioral troubles had a natural toxic reaction to artificial food colors, flavorings, preservatives, and other substances that are added to food in order to extend their shelf life. According to Feingold's theory, "all foods containing additives, dyes, or natural salicylates are to be excluded from the diet of the hyperactive children" (Hulme, 1995, p. 72). There has been much debate in the past 30 years about the efficacy of this food elimination program in the medical community concerning the value of the Feingold diet.

Another intervention that some parents seek is through different types of diets. The gluten- or casein-free diet is popular today. Gluten is found in wheat and other grains, including oats, rye, barley, and foods made from those grains. Casein is a protein found in milk and foods containing milk. Some people with autism cannot properly digest gluten and casein, which form peptides, or substances that act like opiates in their bodies. These peptides alter the person's behavior, perceptions, and responses to his environment. When an individual is unable to adequately process gluten and casein, it is proposed to result in or intensify a variety of disorders including autism (Millward, Ferriter, Calver, & Connell-Jones, 2008). Can removing gluten and casein from a child's diet really improve the symptoms of autism? Millward et al. (2008) examined the effectiveness of a gluten-free/casein-free diet. "One trial of 20 subjects met their inclusion criteria. Although the sample was small, a beneficial effect was found

for a combined gluten- and casein-free diet. The authors concluded that additional investigations of larger samples using quality randomized, controlled trials were needed” (Ray-Mihm, p. 103). Few scientific studies support the benefits of a gluten-free/casein-free diet. This researcher expects to see an increase in these studies in the future.

Families who have a child that is diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder should seek assistance from various community agencies. These agencies can aid the family in reducing stress and improving the functioning of their autistic child. It can be quite beneficial for a child with an autism spectrum disorder to have a therapeutic support staff worker to assist him/her both during the school day and with time after school to learn to function more effectively in social situations away from school. Joanne Godek (2008) has found that, “some students need supports beyond the school program, so wraparound services with mental health agencies and families may be necessary.” Counseling might also benefit a family as a whole, both for the child with autism and for the other family members. A counselor or therapist could assist a child with learning various coping mechanisms. These coping mechanisms might help the child in dealing with various behaviors.

### **Educational Practices Associated with Autism**

Autism seems to be quite an enigma. While it is common to find individuals who disagree on what actually causes some children to be diagnosed with this disability, there is agreement that there is no known cure for the disorders on the autism spectrum. Diagnostic labels such as an autism spectrum

disorder can be quite helpful; they can provide educators with a common language and framework. These labels can also provide a starting point for educators in terms of making connections and having conversations. But, an overreliance on these labels can serve as a barrier to understanding students as individuals and can lead educators to believe that disability categories are static, meaningful, and well understood when in fact they are none of these things (Kluth, 2010). Specialized education is an effective intervention to assist students with autism in becoming more personally independent and socially responsible. “Education of children with autism was accepted as a public responsibility as part of the Education Act of All Handicapped Children in 1975” (Lord & McGee, 2001, p. 12). And yet, 37 years later, even though a federal law requires appropriate education and intervention services, the strategies utilized to educate children with autism vary from state to state. The strategies even vary among school systems. “The complex learning patterns of children on the autism spectrum pose a challenge to educational programming” (Handleman & Harris, 2006, p. 7).

The United States Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs requested that the National Research Council form a Committee on Educational Interventions for Children with Autism. This committee was given the task of integrating the scientific, theoretical, and policy literature and creating a framework for evaluating scientific evidence concerning the effects and features of educational interventions for young children with autism. The primary

focus of this study was early intervention, preschool, and school programs designed for children with autism from birth to age 8 (Lord & McGee, 2001).

Most comprehensive early education programs for children with an autism spectrum disorder share similar goals across a range of areas, though the emphasis placed by the different programs may differ (Lord & McGee, 2001). These areas include verbal and nonverbal communication, social and cognitive development, adaptive skills, motor skills, and to improve upon behavior difficulties.

The National Research Council chose ten well-known programs to study any comparisons that might be evident. The similarities among these programs outweighed the differences. “On the other hand, program differences suggest that there are viable alternatives on many program dimensions. Both differences and similarities among the programs are fundamental. Despite the limitations of the outcome research available, it is likely that many children benefit substantially in the different programs reviewed” (Lord & McGee, 2001, p. 140).

### **Programs for Educating Children with Autism**

The following is a brief chronological overview of the programs examined in “Educating Children with Autism” (Lord & McGee, 2001):

#### **The University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) Young Autism Project**

This program was developed using earlier research with older children and adolescents with autism. In the 1970s, the program was applied to young children with autism. The curriculum centers around behavior intervention. It is delivered in a one-to-one discrete-trial format and is implemented by parents and

trained therapists who work in a home. The treatment's focus is to develop language and early cognitive skills. In addition, the focus is to decrease excessive rituals, tantrums, and aggressive behaviors. In the first year of intervention, the aim is to teach children to respond to basic requests, to imitate, to begin to play with toys, and to interact with family members. During the second year, the focus on teaching language continues. The hope is that these children will enter inclusive settings in either preschool or kindergarten. A paraprofessional assists the child in these inclusive settings.

*Douglass Developmental Center at Rutgers University*

This center opened in 1972. The aim was to serve older children with autism. Pre-school programs were added in 1987. The curriculum is developmentally sequenced and uses applied behavior analysis techniques, beginning with discrete-trial formats and shifting across the curriculum to more naturalistic procedures. The initial instruction is focused on teaching compliance, cognitive and communication skills, basic social skills, and toilet training, as well as on the elimination of serious behavior problems.

*Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine at Chapel Hill*

This program was founded in 1972 as a state-wide autism program that serves people with autistic spectrum disorders of all ages. Regional centers provide regular consultation and training to parents, schools, pre-schools, daycare centers, and other placements throughout the state. The TEAACH program is

based on a structured teaching approach. Environments for the students are organized with clear, concrete, visual information. Parents are considered part of the team and are taught strategies for working with their children. Programming is developed for each child based on an individual assessment of the child's strengths, learning style, interests, and needs. Then the materials are selected and activities are developed. These activities are tailored to the assessment information and the needs of the family.

*Children's Unit at the State University of New York at Binghamton*

This program was developed in 1975. It is an intensive, three-year program for children with severe behavioral disorders. The program operates from a deficit-oriented perspective that seeks to identify the factors most crucial in preventing a child from benefitting fully from services in the local community. The program uses applied behavior analysis techniques. The curriculum is based on individualized goals.

*Pivotal Response Model at the University of California at Santa Barbara*

In 1979, this program was initially started with children of differing ages. In recent years, the primary focus of this program has been on early intervention. This program utilizes a parent education approach. The ultimate goal of this program is to provide children with an autism diagnosis with the social and educational proficiency to participate in inclusive settings. Early in the development of this model, a discrete-trial applied behavior analysis approach was utilized. In recent years, there has been a shift toward use of more naturalistic behavioral interventions. Intervention consists of in-clinic and one-on-



one home teaching. At the same time, the children are also participating in special education services at school. Specific curriculum goals are targeted in areas of communication, self-help, academic, social, and recreational skills.

*Denver Model at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center*

This program originally opened as the Playschool Model in 1981. This model follows the developmentally oriented instructional approach. The basis for this program is that play is an important means for learning various skills, including social, emotional, communicative, and cognitive. In 1998, the treatment unit was closed. The intervention format was altered to be more workable in home and pre-school environments.

*Learning Experiences, an Alternative program for Pre-schoolers and their Parents (LEAP) Pre-school at the University of Colorado School of Education*

This program opened in 1982 as a federally funded demonstration program. It was soon incorporated into the Early Childhood Intervention Program at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic, University of Pittsburgh. Today, there are not only classrooms using this model in Pittsburgh, but there are also new LEAP classrooms being developed in the Denver Public School System. LEAP includes both a pre-school program and a behavioral skill program for parents. There are also national outreach activities. This program was one of the first of its kind to include children with autism with typical children. The LEAP curriculum is known for its peer-mediated social skill interventions. The curriculum is individualized with goals in social, emotional, language, adaptive behavior, cognitive, and physical development areas. The curriculum is a blend of a

behavior approach with developmentally appropriate practices.

*Walden Early Childhood programs at the Emory University School of Medicine*

This program was developed in 1985 at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. At that time, the primary function was a laboratory pre-school to accommodate research in incidental teaching. Following the relocation of the program to Emory University, toddler and pre-kindergarten programs were added to complete an early education continuum. The classrooms include children with autism with a majority of typical peers. The toddler program includes both center- and home-based components. These components include goals to establish sustained engagement, functional verbal language, responsiveness to adults, tolerance and participation with typical peers, and independence in daily living. The pre-school is aimed at expanding the child's language and beginning peer interaction training. In the pre-kindergarten program, the children are exposed to more complicated peer interactions, academic skills, and conventional school behaviors.

*Individualized Support Program at the University of South Florida at Tampa*

This model started in 1987. This program is implemented in both the child's home and community setting during a relatively short period of intensive assistance and ongoing follow-up. The intent of this program is that it is practiced along with on-going daily special education services delivered in pre-school and by other clinical providers. The aim of the program is to help families gain the information and skills needed to solve problems. In addition, the program is intended to help parents become more competent in assisting their

child and become advocates in their child's education. Essential elements of this model include: development of functional communication skills, facilitation of the child's participation in socially inclusive environments, and multifaceted family support.

*Developmental Intervention Model at the George Washington University School of Medicine*

This is a relationship-based approach. In this program, there is a home component where an adult has intensive interaction with a child. The adult follows the child's lead in play and interaction. The children also participate in other individual therapies and early education programs. The curriculum is aimed at six developmental roles: shared attention and regulation; engagement; affective reciprocity and communication through gestures; complex, pre-symbolic and creative use of ideas; and logical and abstract use of ideas and thinking.

According to the National Research Council, "The national challenge is to close the gap between the quality of model programs and the reality of most publicly funded early education programs" (Lord & McGee, 2001, p. 140). So, what is the best program for treating children with autism? Richard Simpson (2004) has stated, "It appears that there is no single, universally best suited and effective method for students with an autism spectrum disorder" (p. 139). The best programs will offer a combination of best practices based on the student's individual needs.

A study by Lori Reffert, a researcher at the University of Toledo, found that school districts in Michigan and Ohio are not following the recommendations set

forth by the National Research Council (2008). Intervention programs for students with autism are lacking. The school districts in these states are either not well informed about what comprises best practice regarding the education of autistic students, or they do not have appropriate funding to implement these best practices. According to Reffert (2008),

Intervention based on applied behavior analysis principles is shown to help change the core symptoms of autism, and it should be a sound and logical addition to a school district's early intervention program. According to the results obtained from this research study, a full 50% of the 74 school districts that responded indicated they used an intervention program that was not applied behavior analysis, discrete trial training, TEACCH or floor time."

Small group intervention can certainly be expensive. This may be why school districts are not utilizing these models more often. School districts must realize though that later education costs may be reduced if intensive behavior interventions are utilized early in an child's education.

### **Intervention Methodologies**

Specific methodologies have been developed as a result of the programs that were designed to educate children with autism. In this section, the various strategies are described. Autism Speaks, an autism science and advocacy organization, has developed a tool kit, the *School and Community Tool Kit*, to help the various members of a school community in understanding and

supporting students with autism. This tool kit provides brief descriptions for interventions often used in school settings:

*Discrete Trial Teaching (DTT) or the Lovaas Model*

Named for its pioneer (ABA-based) Teacher-directed DTT targets skills and behaviors based on an established curriculum. Each skill is broken down into small steps, and taught using prompts, which are gradually eliminated as the steps are mastered. The child is given repeated opportunities to learn and practice each step in a variety of settings. Each time the child achieves the desired result, he receives positive reinforcement, such as verbal praise or something that the child finds to be highly motivating.

*Floortime, or Difference Relationship Model (DIR)*

The premise of Floortime is that an adult can help a child expand his circles of communication by meeting him at his developmental level and building on his strengths. Therapy is often incorporated into play activities – on the floor – and focuses on developing interest in the world, communication and emotional thinking by following the child's lead.

*Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)*

A learning system that allows children with little or no verbal ability to communicate using pictures. An adult helps the child build a vocabulary and articulate desires, observations, or feelings by using pictures consistently, and starts by teaching the child how to exchange a picture for an object. Eventually, the individual is shown how to distinguish between pictures and symbols and use

these to form sentences. Although PECS is based on visual tools, verbal reinforcement is a major component and verbal communication is encouraged.

#### *Pivotal Response Treatment (PRT)*

(ABA-based) PRT is a child-directed intervention that focuses on critical, or “pivotal,” behaviors that affect a wide range of behaviors. The primary pivotal behaviors are motivation and child’s initiations of communications with others. The goal of PRT is to produce positive changes in the pivotal behaviors, leading to improvement in communication, play and social behaviors and the child’s ability to monitor his own behavior. PRT is a child-directed intervention.

#### *Relationship Development Intervention (RDI)*

RDI seeks to improve the individual’s long-term quality of life by helping him improve social skills, adaptability, and self-awareness through a systematic approach to building emotional, social, and relational skills.

#### *Social Communication/Emotional Regulation/Transactional Support (SCERTS)*

SCERTS uses practices from other approaches (PRT, TEACCH, Floortime and RDI), and promotes child-initiated communication in everyday activities and the ability to learn and spontaneously apply functional and relevant skills in a variety of settings and with a variety of partners. The SCERTS Model favors having children learn with and from children who provide good social and language models in inclusive settings as much as possible.

*Training and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped  
Children (TEACCH)*

TEACCH is a special education program using Structured Teaching, a process designed to capitalize on the relative strength and preference for processing information visually in individuals with autism, while taking into account the recognized difficulties. Individualized assessment and planning is used to create a highly-structured environment (organized with visual supports) to help the individual map out activities and work independently.

*Verbal Behavior (VB)*

(ABA-based) VB employs specific behavioral research on the development of language and is designed to motivate a child to learn language. VB is designed and is intended to motivate a child to learn language by making a connection between a word and its value.

These interventions are not considered to be the sole curriculum for special education students who have been identified as having characteristics on the autism spectrum. The interventions are meant to provide support for the general education and administrative school staff who interact with students with autism in various capacities. In addition, the resources can be employed by special education and administrative staff in their efforts to plan for and support students in general education environments and involvement in the school community as a whole (Autism Speaks, 2008). Connie Harrington, the principal of Meadows Elementary School in Manhattan Beach, California is proud of the success of

utilizing these resources so that students with autism can succeed in regular education classrooms. Harrington stated:

Meadows Elementary discontinued its Special Day Class in 1996, after reading the research on the benefits to the entire student body of full inclusion versus special education classes. We made each student a member of a grade level classroom. Doing so has not only made our students with special needs integral parts of our student body and increased their learning exponentially, but also has benefited the general education population. Over the past twelve years I have had no more than two complaints from general education parents, but I cannot count the number of positive feedback interactions I have had with general education parents, who celebrate the effects on their children of interacting with and supporting special education students. At Meadows, we take a huge amount of pride in the fact that full inclusion has become embraced, institutionalized, and unquestioned. (Autism Speaks, 2008)

This compilation of programs and methodologies is very important to this study because it provides the stakeholders of a school community (i.e., students, faculty, staff, administrators, parents, and community members) with a variety of interventions that have been successful when utilized with children with autism in school settings.

### **Inclusion Movement**

For most of America's history, schools have been allowed to exclude and often did exclude certain children, especially those with disabilities. Since the



time of the Civil Rights Movement, especially in the 1960s, however, there has been a great deal of federal legislation that relates directly or indirectly to individuals with disabilities, particularly children and youth.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that eligible students with disabilities have available to them special education and related services designed to address their unique educational needs. The laws from which the present-day IDEA has launched include:

- P.L. 89-10, The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), the statutory basis upon which early special education legislation was drafted; three subsequent amendments in 1965, 1966, and 1968
- P.L. 91-230, ESEA Amendments of 1970, which included part B, the Education of the Handicapped Act
- P.L. 93-280, The Education Amendments of 1974, included Title VI, which was the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1974; an appropriate education for all children with disabilities was mentioned for the first time
- P.L. 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, mandated a free appropriate public education for all children with disabilities, ensured due process rights, mandated individualized education programs and the least restrictive environment, and became the core of federal funding for special education
- P.L. 101-476, In 1990, autism was added as a separate category of disability. This was not a change in the law so much as it is a clarification.

Students with autism were covered by the law previously, but now the law identifies them as a separate and distinct class entitled to the law's benefits.

- Amendments to the EHA, in 1983, 1986 (which established the Part H program), 1990 (which renamed the law IDEA), and 1992
- P.L. 105-17, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997, the current law
- IDEA 2004 – Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

### **Inclusion and the Courts**

In addition to federal laws concerning inclusion, there have been a number of court cases that have influenced how students with disabilities are educated in public schools. The following brief descriptions of important cases dealing with inclusion were found on the webpage of the Renaissance Group (University of Northern Iowa, 2009). This group is associated with the Department of Special Education at University of Northern Iowa.

#### **Daniel R. R. v. State Board of Education (1989)**

In this 5<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court case involving the education of a 6-year-old boy with Down syndrome, the Court asked two main questions about placing a student with disabilities in a regular education setting. The Court wrote that it saw a two-part test for determining compliance with the mainstreaming requirement.

1. Can education in the regular education classroom, with the use of supplemental aids and services, be achieved satisfactorily for a given child?
  - a. Has the state taken steps to accommodate the handicapped child in regular education, and if so, are these efforts sufficient and within reason?
  - b. Will the child receive an educational benefit from regular education? The Court says that “academic achievement is not the only purpose of mainstreaming. Integrating a handicapped child into a non-handicapped environment may be beneficial in and of it self... even if the child cannot flourish academically.”
  - c. Is there any detriment to the child from the proposed mainstreaming?
  - d. What effect will the handicapped child’s presence have on the regular classroom environment and on the education of the other students in the class?
2. Has the child been mainstreamed to the maximum extent appropriate (this must occur if the decision is to remove the child from the regular education environment for a portion of the day)?

The court noted the law does not permit “mere token gesture” (p. 1048) by schools in the accommodation of students with disabilities.

Oberti v. Board of Education (1992/1993)

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Circuit Court developed a two-pronged approach to determining if meeting the IDEA. The Court applied tests to determine if adequate levels of supplementary aids and services were adopted. The Court concluded no specific training, coordination, and communication with special education staff or planning had been done to deal with the student's behavior problem. Therefore, the Court concluded that schools were required to make greater efforts to mainstream students with disabilities or explain why not.

Board of Education v. Holland (1992, 1994)

The 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit District Court defined LRE as a strong Congressional preference. This opinion combined factors from several previous decisions to determine what the least restrictive environment is. Those factors dealt with educational benefits in a regular classroom; non-academic benefits for the handicapped child in a regular classroom; the child's effect on the teacher and other child in the regular class; and the cost of supplementary aids and service to mainstream the handicapped child. The Court said cost is only a factor if it will significantly affect another child in the district.

Hartmann v. Loudoun County Board of Education (1996)

A Virginia federal district court ruled that a nonverbal student with autism should attend a regular education second grade class with appropriate supplemental aids and services. However, when the case was appealed, the 4<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court concluded that the inclusion efforts were sufficient with staff training and help on

behavior issues, reduced class size, and class composed of independent workers.

*Jonathan G. v. Lower Merion School District (1997)*

Pennsylvania parents opposed inclusion but a Court said the regular education classroom was appropriate with supplementary services.

*Cedar Rapids Community School District v. Garret F. (1999)*

The Supreme Court ruled that taxpayer-supported schools are responsible for the costs of providing continual care for disabled students under a federal law that says all children must receive “free, appropriate public education.” Under the Court’s reading of the IDEA’s relevant provisions, medical treatments such as suctioning, ventilator checks, catheterization, and others which can be administered by non-physician personnel come within the parameters of the special education law’s related services.

*Gaskin v. Pennsylvania Department of Education (2004)*

In December, 2004, counsel for the parties in the *Gaskin* case signed a provisional settlement agreement in this class action lawsuit, which was filed in June 1994. Under this agreement, the Pennsylvania Department of Education had to undertake a series of reforms in special education processes and procedures including data collection, compliance monitoring, plan approval, IEP format, and complaint resolution.

As these case descriptions illustrate, the various courts of the United States are continually ensuring that students with disabilities are receiving an education that is the most appropriate for their needs. The special education practices that

educators are familiar with today have been developed due to all of the laws, court challenges, and litigation that have occurred over the years.

### **Attitudes toward Inclusion**

What is inclusive schooling? According to Doyle, inclusive schooling stresses interdependence and independence, views all students as capable and complex, and values a sense of community (2008). Kluth believes “if all schools were to create more humane, just, and democratic learning communities, then all students will be valued and seen as essential members of the school” (2010, p. 23). She continues by stating that “Inclusion is more than a set of strategies or practices, it is an educational orientation that respects and builds on the uniqueness that each learner brings to the classroom” (2010, p. 23).

Jon and Karen walk in line side by side as the children in Mrs. G’s second-grade class proceed toward the stage. The audience, filled with other primary classes and parents, eagerly anticipates the music program that the children have rehearsed for weeks. Jon’s parents seem amazed – this is the first time their 9-year old son has been able to participate fully in such festivities. Karen points to pictures on what is actually a “script” for the program: walk in, sit down, sing, dance, and be quiet.

Just yesterday, Mrs. E noticed Jon’s feeling of stress. He touched her face with a puzzled look, and she asked, “Jon, are you worried about the program tomorrow? How about if we practice?” He immediately stood up and took her by the hand to practice. Mrs. E

found Karen walking from the office and asked if she could help with this impromptu rehearsal. Together, Karen and Jon practiced entering the empty auditorium, sitting where Mrs. G's second-grade class was assigned to sit, and singing the songs in the program. At the start of each event within the program, Karen pointed to a picture of that event so that Jon could follow along. This picture schedule provided Jon with a script for the program. Jon left the auditorium smiling.

Jon's parents were completely amazed at Jon's participation in the program with the other second graders. Few people noticed how Karen gently reminded Jon of what comes next. Mrs. E and Mrs. G seemed grateful for Karen's work as a peer partner and felt strongly that their many rehearsals led to Jon's comfort with the routine of the primary program. Thinking back to the boy who came to participate in Mrs. G's first-grade class last year and how worried she was to have a student with such unique needs in her general education class, she was particularly glad to see Jon fully participating in the class program.

This description was included in an article by Winterman and Sapona (2002). It illustrates the successful experience of an child with autism who has been included in a regular education classroom. As more teachers witness these positive experiences with children with autism in their classrooms, they will become more comfortable with the idea of inclusion for these special needs students. "Designing inclusive learning environments that support the development of young children with autism is a challenge for both teachers and

administrators” (Winterman & Sapona, p. 30). But for those children who gain from being included in a regular education classroom, the extra effort is worthwhile.

In order to have more success with inclusion for students with autism, it is important for regular and special educators to have positive attitudes. Lisa Waligore (2002) researched teacher attitudes toward inclusion. In her master’s thesis she stated, “teacher training would help educators better deal with special education students that are placed in regular education classrooms” (p. 11). She also noted that “teachers without training not only demonstrated negative attitudes, but also lacked confidence in their instructional skills to teach students with disabilities” (2003, p. 12). It is apparent that extensive professional development is needed for teachers in order for them to become more successful in including students with disabilities in regular education classrooms.

Myra Kelly (2004), a doctoral candidate, also researched teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion. She took it further by investigating whether the teachers’ attitudes were related to their perceptions of the progress made by the students over the period of the study. The students were evaluated on the Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS) and the Vineland socialization subscales. The teachers completed a questionnaire, a demographic survey for both the teacher and the student group. In addition, some of the teachers were interviewed to determine their views on inclusion. After Kelly analyzed the data, she concluded that the students in the study made no significant change either positively or negatively in their social skills. There was, however, a decrease in



symptoms of autism as indicated by the general education teachers' ratings on the CARS. In neither group of teachers was there a significant correlation between attitude toward inclusion and pre-treatment to post-treatment changes on the CARS.

Kelly reported that the findings of her study suggested that the teachers' favorable or unfavorable attitude toward inclusion did not have an effect on their ability to accurately rate children's social skills. The findings also suggested that negative teacher attitudes toward inclusion did not necessarily mean that the students with autism who are included will not improve. The regular education and the special education teachers felt that the included students' behavior was the most important characteristic to be taken into account when deciding which students would be included in the regular education classrooms. The teachers thought that only those students with mild forms of stereotypical behavior attributed to students with autism should be included. In summary, Kelly reported that the primary focus of the special educators was on socialization, while the primary focus of the general education teachers was the students' academics.

Another area to consider concerning attitudes about inclusion would be what parents think about this practice. In her doctoral dissertation, Judy Horrocks (2005) noted, "Parents cited concerns regarding peer relationships and rejection." Horrocks also included information about a study that explored parents' views on the inclusion of their children with severe disabilities. This study, as discussed in *Taking Sides: Parent Views on Inclusion for their Children*

*with Severe Disabilities*, by Palmer, Fuller, Arora, and Nelson (2001), included 140 parents' comments concerning their support or resistance to inclusion.

"Parents supporting inclusion for their children stated beliefs that the child would learn more due to higher expectations and a more stimulating environment and also cited the benefits for the regular education students" (Horrocks, 2005, p. 35). Therefore, these parents believed that their children would learn more if they were included in a regular education classroom. She then discussed the parents who opposed inclusion for their children. "The parents indicated that the severity of their children's disability precluded the benefit of such programs and they felt the regular education classroom would not be accommodating nor welcoming to their children. Parents cited attitudinal and social barriers as one of the major difficulties for their children" (Horrocks, 2005, p. 35). As one parent stated in the study by Palmer et al.,

I know the downfalls of mainstreaming and I know the up side. I consider mainstreaming as something that must be decided on a case-by-case basis. Like any other fad, it is being evangelized as a cure-all. It isn't. It is terrific in some cases. In others, it is child abuse (2001, p. 482).

Sadly, there is no exact formula for an effective inclusive school. Therefore, inclusive schools do not look the same. But, schools that are committed to educating all students will share certain characteristics. According to Kluth (2010), they will have committed leadership, democratic classrooms, reflective educators, a supportive school culture, engaging and relevant curricula, and responsive instruction (p. 24).

In order to successfully incorporate inclusion in an elementary school, the stakeholders must work together. Teachers, both regular and special educators, parents, and school administrators must have a similar attitude which favors including students with autism in regular education classes. When these stakeholders share a common vision, they will work harder to make that vision a reality.

### **Elementary School Principals and Special Education**

Designing a learning environment that is inclusive of all students is challenging. Since the Centers for Disease Control has stated that 1 in 110 American children has some form of autism, it is now crucial for elementary school principals to learn more about this disability. The one thing that is assured concerning autism is that if you know one student with autism, then you only know one. Autism is quite complex and the number of children diagnosed with this disorder is on the rise. Students who have been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder are all so different. According to Winterman and Sapona (2002), "Many educators still have questions about what constitutes optimal learning environments for students with significant communication problems" (p. 30). They then posed the question, "What kind of learning environment best supports the development of social and communication skills for children who have a label of autism spectrum disorder?" (p. 30). Students with autism are no different than regular education students when it comes to the importance of differentiated instruction – there is no one size fits all when it comes to the education of these children.

A principal's role has changed. Principals not only design, lead, manage, and implement programs for their regular education students, but also for students with disabilities. In order to implement a successful inclusionary program in an elementary school, a principal must have a strong vision and belief that all children can learn and that all students have the right to learn. The principal must then communicate that vision to all of the stakeholders associated with that particular school.

In researching principals' attitudes toward students with autism and inclusion, the researcher examined the work of Judy L. Horrocks of Lehigh University (2005). She developed *The Principal's Perspective Questionnaire*. This questionnaire is a survey designed to look at the factors related to the administrators' perspective regarding special education placement decisions in their buildings. Sections one and four of the questionnaire include demographic information. Section two requests each respondent to make a recommendation for a specific level of inclusion for each of five children based on educational information provided. Section three includes statements regarding the inclusion of special education students with all levels of disabilities. After surveying principals with this questionnaire, Horrocks found that the most significant factor in predicting both a positive attitude toward inclusion of children with disabilities and higher recommendations of placements for children with autism was the principal's belief that children with autism could be included in a regular education classroom (2005).

Cindy Praisner (2003) conducted a survey of 408 elementary principals to investigate relationships regarding attitudes toward inclusion. She found, “1 in 5 principals’ attitudes toward inclusion are positive while most are uncertain. Positive experiences with students with disabilities and exposure to special education concepts are associated with a more positive attitude toward inclusion. Further, principals with more positive attitudes and/or experiences are more likely to place students in less restrictive settings” (p. 135). When Praisner discussed the results of the survey, she stated:

- 21.1% of the principals were clearly positive about inclusion and 2.7% were negative
- 29.6% of the principals chose full-time regular education with support as the most appropriate placement option and 6.0% chose special education services outside the regular education classroom
- A significant positive relationship between attitude and inclusiveness was found. The more positive the attitude toward inclusion, the more inclusive the placements selected.
- A significant positive correlation between experience and inclusiveness was obtained. So, the more positive the experiences with students with disabilities, the more likely the principal would choose a less restrictive setting.
- Least restrictive placements in regular education classrooms were chosen most often for the categories of speech and language impairment (93.7%), physical disability (87.4%), other health impairment

(84.9%), specific learning disability (81.9%), deaf/hearing impairment (74.5%), and blind/visual impairments (71.99%).

- Regular education settings were chosen less frequently for serious emotional disturbance (20.4%) and autism (30.1%).
- The most segregated settings of special education services outside of regular education classrooms were chosen by more than half of the respondents for serious emotional disturbance (63.6%) and autism/pervasive developmental disorder (49.8%). In addition, one third of respondents would place students with mental retardation, currently referred to as mental disabilities, (29.4%), neurological impairment (36.9%), or multi-handicaps, now referred to as multiple disabilities, (39.1%) in such restricted settings (2003).

In order to be successful in incorporating inclusionary practices in an elementary school, the principal must be ready and willing to make decisions that will provide appropriate opportunities for students with special needs to remain in regular education classrooms. Margaret McLaughlin's (2009) thoughts sum up the need for principals to become more productive regarding inclusion for students with autism, "The demands to improve the educational outcomes of these students are greater than ever" (p. 3).

Theoharis argued that administrators and other leaders help students, staff, and the community understand inclusion as a philosophy or ideology that will permeate the school; they help staff members when new ways of "doing business" are adopted; they provide encouragement and support as teachers

take risks and try new approaches; they educate families and community members about the school's beliefs and their inclusive mission; and they help to celebrate day-to-day successes and problem-solve day-to-day struggles (2009).

Belinda Crisman, a principal of an elementary school in Ringgold, Georgia, believes that inclusion for students diagnosed with autism in regular education classes can be successful. She cites the following key factors as being imperative when creating a successful inclusion program: appropriate placement, teacher and paraprofessional selection, parental involvement, vision and belief, professional learning, peer support, team approach, behavior plans, and sense of humor. With the successful implementation of inclusive programming at Boynton Elementary School, Crisman reported that 91 percent of the school's students with autism scored at or above grade level on Georgia's state assessment in reading, and 79 percent in math. And, in the inclusive classrooms at Boynton Elementary School, 98 percent of the students were at or above grade level in reading and 99 percent in math (2008). These statistics illustrate the success that can be achieved when students with autism are included in regular education classrooms.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Albert Bandura proposed a social learning theory that has become perhaps the most influential theory of learning and development. According to Bandura:

Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them

what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action (1977).

So it makes sense that those who follow Bandura's theory believe that people learn new behavior through observational learning of the social factors in their environment. If people observe positive, desired outcomes in the observed behavior, then they are more likely to model, imitate, and adopt the behavior themselves. Therefore, children, even those children who have been diagnosed with autism, will learn from each other in an inclusive educational setting. In addition, principals and teachers can learn from one another concerning the acceptance of inclusion for students with autism within a school.

### **Summary**

Elementary principals will face increasing numbers of students with autism within their buildings. In fact, this disorder has become so prevalent that almost everyone is familiar with the term "autism." Most of us even know someone with the diagnosis. Ann Masten (2007) has recognized the following:

Many schools may not be fully prepared to provide the learning environments required for children with an autism spectrum disorder.

It is imperative for school administrators and educators to be aware of factors that promote and facilitate learning for students diagnosed with autism, each of whom requires special education services in order to reach his or her fullest possible potential at school.



Therefore, these school leaders must be informed of the best practices concerning the appropriate programs for treating and educating these students.

This chapter investigated the history of autism, various treatments for autism, different educational practices associated with autism, the inclusion movement, attitudes towards autism, and principals and special education. In Chapter 3, the methodology for the research study will be described.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

For most of America's history, schools have been allowed to exclude and often did exclude certain children, especially those with disabilities. Since the time of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, however, there has been a great deal of federal legislation that relates directly or indirectly to individuals with disabilities, particularly children and youth. Should all students, including those with disabilities, be taught in regular education classrooms? "Inclusion has become a critical part of the reform effort to improve the delivery of services to students with disabilities by focusing on the placement of these students in general education classes" (Praisner, 2003).

The literature on inclusion has identified a number of roles and responsibilities for principals that are necessary to create and sustain successful inclusion settings. However, the degree to which administrators support change efforts is often determined by the attitudes and values they hold. For that reason, if inclusion is to be a possible alternative to more segregated placements, its success will depend heavily upon the readiness and willingness of school leaders to make decisions that will provide appropriate opportunities for students with special needs to remain in general education (Ayers & Meyer, 1992).

Cindy Praisner conducted a survey of 408 elementary principals in 2003 to investigate relationships regarding attitudes toward inclusion. She found, "1 in 5 principals' attitudes toward inclusion are positive while most are uncertain.

Positive experiences with students with disabilities and exposure to special education concepts are associated with a more positive attitude toward inclusion. Further, principals with more positive attitudes and/or experiences are more likely to place students in less restrictive settings” (p. 135). She also discovered that while principals may be well trained to administer general education programs within their schools, they may not have the training to address inclusion as part of the curriculum. Praisner found that general special education may be an area where administrators are comfortable, but when it comes to specific topics that address strategies and processes that support inclusion, the administrators are lacking (2003).

The focus of this study was to ascertain elementary principals’ attitudes regarding the inclusion of children with autism in the regular education classrooms of Pennsylvania’s public elementary schools.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In an inclusive school, the general education program does not abandon the responsibility for students with special needs. Instead, the general education program should work cooperatively with special education to provide a quality educational program for all students. The purpose of this study was to identify the relationship between the attitudes of elementary principals toward including students with disabilities in regular education classes and their recommendations for the placement of students with autism in Pennsylvania’s public elementary schools.

Principals provide the drive and encouragement to make inclusive education come to pass. In Pennsylvania, it is the school principal's duty to ensure that the guidelines under IDEA and PDE policy are being implemented. They are to understand the roles of each of the professionals and IEP team members responsible for providing education to each and every student. As a result, a principal and the IEP team must develop a plan to ensure success for all students, even those with disabilities such as autism. The attitude of the principal would seemingly have an effect on the faculty and staff of an elementary school. The focus of this study was to gauge elementary principals' attitudes regarding inclusion of children with autism in Pennsylvania's public elementary schools.

### **Research Methodology**

According to Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009), "All educational inquiry ultimately involves a decision to study or describe something – to ask some question and seek an answer. It also necessitates that data of some kind be collected, that the data be analyzed in some way, and that the researcher come to some conclusion or interpretation" (p. 6). Furthermore, "Qualitative research is the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest" (Gay et al., p. 7). But, researchers do not just conduct studies to amass data. "The purpose of research is to discover answers to questions through the application of systematic procedures" (Berg, 2009, p. 8). In addition, a strong point of qualitative research is its capability to provide complex textual descriptions of

how people experience a specific issue. This type of research provides information about the “human” side of the issue. And, at times the research shows contradictory behaviors, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of the individuals who participated in the study.

Qualitative methodology was selected for this study since this method permitted the researcher to examine individual elementary principals’ attitudes toward the inclusion of students with autism in regular education classrooms.

### **Descriptive Case Study Approach**

The case study approach is based on an in-depth investigation of a single individual, group, or event. Yin (1994) defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p.13). In addition, Yin identified five components of research design that are important for case studies: a study’s questions; its propositions, if any; its unit(s) of analysis; the logic linking the data to the propositions; and the criteria for interpreting the findings. The study’s questions are most likely to be “how” and “why” questions and their definition is the first task of the researcher. The study’s propositions sometimes derive from the “how” and “why” questions and are helpful in focusing the study’s goals. Not all studies need to have propositions. The unit of analysis defines what the case is. This could be groups, organizations, or countries, but it is the primary unit of analysis. Linking the data to propositions and the criteria for interpreting the findings are the least developed aspects in case studies (as cited in Tellis, 1997).

In his book, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, Yin (1994) explained that there are six sources of evidence that can be collected for case study research: 1) documents (letters, agendas, progress reports); 2) archival records (service records, organizational charts, budgets etc.); 3) interviews (typically open-ended, but also focused, structured and surveys are possible); 4) direct observations (formal or casual; useful to have multiple observers); 5) participant observation (assuming a role in the situation and getting an inside view of the events); and 6) physical artifacts. A case study design is executed to gain a thorough grasp of the circumstance and significance for those involved (Merriam, 1998). Case study design was selected for this research to gain a comprehensive understanding of the attitudes of elementary principals concerning the inclusion of students with autism in regular education classes. In addition, the aim is to try to disseminate information and attempt to influence policy and practice at the district and intermediate unit level. Theories generated from case studies can persuade policy, practice, and future research (Merriam, 1998).

### **Research Questions**

This study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the concerns of elementary principals regarding the inclusion of students with autism in the general curriculum?
2. What are the concerns of elementary principals regarding all students meeting the academic standards?

3. How do prior personal and professional experiences and professional development influence elementary principals' concerns?
4. What is the relationship between elementary principals' formal education and professional development experiences with students with autism and their attitude toward the inclusion of students with autism?
5. What is the relationship between an elementary principal's attitude toward the inclusion of students with disabilities and the principal's recommendation for placement for a child with a profile that depicts a child with autism?
6. What is the relationship between an elementary principal's personal characteristics and the principal's attitudes toward inclusion of children with autism?

### **Research Design**

This qualitative study followed a descriptive case study approach using semi-structured interviews to identify elementary principals' attitudes toward the inclusion of students with autism in regular education classes. In-depth interviews were conducted with study participants. Purposive sampling was used. According to Gay et al. (2009), "Because many potential participants are unwilling to undergo the lengthy demands of participation, sampling in qualitative research is almost always purposeful" (p. 135). The experience of the researcher comes into play since he/she must rely on experience and insight to select a sample.

## **Participants**

The sample population for this study was drawn from elementary principals with at least three years of experience who are employed at schools in western Pennsylvania. Six elementary principals, from different school districts, were interviewed. Potential participants were contacted through each district's superintendent via a letter of invitation. Interested superintendents were instructed to return a signed site approval form in a stamped-return envelope. The researcher then contacted the superintendent(s) to obtain contact information for the appropriate elementary principal(s) within that district. The researcher then contacted the principals via personal phone calls and/or emails in order to invite participants to take part in the study. These personal phone calls and emails were followed by a letter of invitation that outlined the purpose of study and the estimated time requirement. A letter of informed consent (Appendix B) accompanied by a stamped-return envelope was then mailed to the selected participants. Once the letters of informed consent were received, the researcher contacted the participants to set up the interviews. A confirmation message was sent via email to each participant, along with a demographic survey (Appendix C) and the interview questions (Appendix D) so that the participant could preview the questions. The participants were asked to send back the completed demographic survey prior to the interviews. The interviews took place at the interviewee's school district, by phone, and by Skype based on each participant's preference and convenience. In addition, the interviews took place in a quiet and private setting.



## **Instrumentation**

A semi-structured interview process was used in this qualitative, descriptive case study. A semi-structured interview includes a combination of structured and unstructured questions. According to Berg (2009), "This type of interview involves the implementation of a number of predetermined questions and special topics" (p. 107). Furthermore, "These questions are typically asked of each interviewee in a systematic and consistent order, but the interviewers are allowed freedom to digress; that is, the interviewers are permitted (in fact, expected) to probe far beyond the answers to their prepared standardized questions" (Berg, 2009, p. 107).

The questions were field tested through interviews of two elementary school principals with three or more years of experience as an administrator in their school district. These individuals were not participants in the study. The participants in the pilot study were selected by the researcher using purposive sampling based mainly on convenience. The interview questions were revised based on information gathered during the pilot interviews.

In researching principals' attitudes toward students with autism and inclusion, the researcher examined the work of Judy L. Horrocks of Lehigh University. Through the process of conducting this study, the researcher intended to build on Ms. Horrocks' study. Horrocks developed *The Principal's Perspective Questionnaire*. This questionnaire is a survey designed to look at the factors related to the administrators' perspective regarding special education placement decisions in their buildings. Sections one and four of the

questionnaire include demographic information. Section two requests each respondent to make a recommendation for a specific level of inclusion for each of five children based on educational information provided. Section three includes statements regarding the inclusion of special education students with all levels of disabilities.

The interview questions for this study were developed based on research from Horrocks' (2005) similar doctoral dissertation. The interview questions were validated during the pilot study and by using an expert panel to review the questions. The interviews were conducted by the researcher along with scenario situations.

Figure 1 is a matrix that provides a cross reference of research questions to interview questions. This matrix ensured that the interview questions were relevant to the research questions and was used as a guide when analyzing data from the interviews. During data analysis, it was important to match interview questions to research questions during the coding process in order to properly categorize the points of alignment that emerged.

Table 1 <i>Research Question Alignment to Interview Questions</i>	
Research Questions	Interview Questions
1. What are the concerns of elementary principals regarding the inclusion of students with autism in the general curriculum?	9, 11, 12, 15, 16, 18, 19
2. What are the concerns of elementary principals regarding all students meeting the academic standards?	10, 13, 14, 17
3. How do prior personal and professional experiences and professional development influence elementary principals' concerns?	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 20
4. What is the relationship between elementary principals' formal education and professional development experiences with students with autism and their attitude toward the inclusion of students with autism?	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
5. What is the relationship between an elementary principal's attitude toward the inclusion of students with disabilities and the principal's recommendation for placement for a child with a profile that depicts a child with autism?	Scenario questions 1 – 5
6. What is the relationship between an elementary principal's personal characteristics and the principal's attitudes toward inclusion of children with autism?	Scenario questions 1 – 5

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data was collected through interviews with participants in the study. Each interview was semi-structured to allow for informality and variation in the progression of the interview. For each interview, the researcher followed an

interview guide in order to maintain consistency among the participant interviews. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The written transcript was forwarded to the participant so that accuracy could be verified. The participants were encouraged to modify the transcript for clarification, if necessary.

The researcher took notes in a field journal throughout the interview process. The researcher used this field journal to take notes during the interviews and to write personal reflections after each interview. This information was utilized during data analysis. According to Gay et al. (2009), "A great deal of data analysis occurs before data collection is complete. Researchers think about and develop hunches about what they see and hear during data collection" (p. 458). Thus, it was important for the researcher to reflect upon each participant interview.

After the interviews were transcribed, the researcher read and commented on the transcripts in order to begin to develop a coding structure as points of alignment begin to emerge from the data. A preliminary list of the points of alignment was developed for each research question, including examples, representative quotes, and if appropriate, contradictory information. The research began with a short list of tentative codes that reflected common ideas or themes (i.e., points of alignment) and then the list was expanded as additional interview transcriptions were analyzed. Once the common points of alignment were identified and classified, the researcher reviewed these points with a retired elementary principal who had over twenty years of experience in her school

district prior to retirement. This enhanced the study because it served as an extra measure of insight.

### **Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the interview questions and to practice the interview procedure. Once permission had been granted from the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board, a purposive sample of two current elementary principals with a minimum of three years of administrative experience was selected. The pilot was conducted by interviewing two elementary principals from school districts in western Pennsylvania. Permission was granted from the superintendent of each principal's school district prior to the interview. Participation in the pilot study was on a voluntary basis. The participants were informed of the intent of the interview and signed a release to indicate their consent for participation. Each principal was assured that he/she would remain anonymous. The interviews lasted for approximately sixty minutes for each participant. Each interviewed was taped and transcribed. The transcripts were provided to each participant for verification. The responses provided during the interviews helped to disclose potential problems with the interview questions. Due to the data collected in the pilot interviews, some of the interview questions were adjusted prior to the actual study.

The experience gained from the pilot study was invaluable to this research study. The researcher was able to become comfortable with process of interviewing participants and to fine-tune the interview questions.

## **Pilot Study Results**

The two elementary principals who were interviewed for the pilot were provided with electronic copies of the demographic survey, an overview of the study's research questions, and the interview questions prior to their interviews. The principals returned their completed demographic surveys to the researcher prior to the interview. During the interview, each principal answered the questions and then made comments on the wording, format, and order of the questions. Follow-up emails were made with each pilot participant to solicit additional feedback pertaining to the interview process and to the actual questions. The principals shared similar comments concerning the interview process. The participants felt that the interview questions did address the intended research questions. They also stated that they thought the questions were organized in the appropriate order to gain insight as the each participant's attitude toward the inclusion of students with disabilities. They stated that the questions were geared toward students with disabilities and not specific enough to autism. Therefore, additional questions specifically designed to ascertain the participants' feelings toward autism were added. The added questions were numbers 4, 6, 8, 10, 13, and 16.

After each interview, the recorded conversation was transcribed and then the data was analyzed. During the analysis process, the researcher developed a coding system for sifting through the information with the hope of identifying overall themes or elements in relation to the research questions.

The information gained in the pilot study confirmed that the design of the methodology and analysis procedures was appropriate to be utilized successfully in the formal research study. In addition, it was determined that the proposed interview questions, with the addition of questions directed specifically the participants' opinions concerning the inclusion of students with autism, would elicit sufficient information to provide considerable qualitative data in relationship to the research questions.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected via the interview process was analyzed through pattern matching. Through this process, common points of alignment were identified as to the principals' attitudes toward the inclusion of students with autism in regular education classrooms.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Only public school elementary principals who work in school districts that are in western Pennsylvania were included in the sample for this study. Due to the regional similarities of the various school districts that are located in this region, these districts may have a common culture. Principals of non-public elementary schools were not included in the study. The results of the study were limited by the responding principals' accuracy in self-reporting.

### **Summary**

This qualitative study used a semi-structured interview process with elementary principals with three or more years of experience as an administrator in school districts that are part of the Riverview Intermediate Unit 6. The

elementary principals were selected for interviews based on purposive sampling. The interviews were held at the school district of the interviewee, either in person, by telephone, or by Skype. Each interview was audio-taped and then transcribed. The participants were asked to make placement recommendations based on information provided in scenarios. These placement recommendations were then discussed in an effort to ascertain the principals' attitudes regarding their recommendations. After the interview had been transcribed, the interviewee received a copy of the transcript so that he/she could ascertain the accuracy of the transcription. The interviewee was able to make modifications to the transcript if necessary.

Chapter 4 focuses on the data collected from the participant interviews. Common points of alignments are presented. Supporting information and participant comments are included. In addition, in Chapter 5, conclusions are made concerning the identified points of alignment and the research questions that they answer.



## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS OF DATA

#### **Introduction**

This qualitative descriptive case study examined the attitudes of elementary principals toward the inclusion of students with autism in regular education classrooms in small, rural school districts in western Pennsylvania. Qualitative data was collected from in-depth interviews with six elementary principals, each with at least three years of administrative experience, in order to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the concerns of elementary principals regarding the inclusion of students with autism in the general curriculum?
2. What are the concerns of elementary principals regarding all students meeting the academic standards?
3. How do personal and professional prior experiences and professional development influence elementary principals' concerns?
4. What is the relationship between elementary principals' formal education and professional development experiences with students with autism and their attitude toward the inclusion of students with autism?
5. What is the relationship between an elementary principal's attitude toward the inclusion of students with disabilities and the principal's recommendation for placement for a child with a profile that depicts a child with autism?

6. What is the relationship between an elementary principal's personal characteristics and the principal's attitudes toward inclusion of children with autism?

This chapter provides a demographic overview of the participants and includes a summary of the elementary principals' responses to the questions posed in the semi-structured interview. The principals were asked a series of questions; first about their attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education classrooms and then, more specifically, about their attitudes toward the inclusion of students with autism in regular education classrooms.

After analyzing the qualitative data collected through the interviews, both common and conflicting opinions were scrutinized. Three major points of alignment emerged relative to the responses given by the participants during the interview process. These points of alignment were: that principals made placement recommendations based on a case by case basis and not strictly on a diagnosis; that inclusion not only benefitted the students with autism but also their general education peers; and that limited knowledge and experiences with inclusion and autism are barriers for many administrators in their placement recommendations.

The data was dissected through various lenses of analysis. First the participants' responses were examined to identify common and conflicting opinions concerning inclusion. Next, the principals' views concerning students with disabilities versus students with autism were studied. The principals'

experience as a teacher versus their experience as an administrator was also considered. Finally, the principals' comments in conjunction with Bandura's social learning theory were examined.

### **Review of the Interview Process, Data Collection, and Analysis**

Interviews were conducted over a five-month period of time. Subject participation consent was obtained prior to each interview. Initial contact was made with each participating school district's superintendent via email. After each superintendent responded to the email inquiry, a formal letter of introduction stating the purpose of the study, the criteria for the principal's selection, and a site approval form was mailed to each superintendent who had expressed interest in participating in the study. Also included was a copy of the interview questions.

Once the superintendents had given their approval for participation, the elementary principals were contacted via email to gauge their interest in participating in the study. If a positive response was received from the email inquiry, a formal letter of introduction stating the purpose of the study, the criteria for participation, and an informed consent form was mailed to the principal (Appendix B). Additional contacts were made through email and phone calls to set up and confirm interview dates, times, and formats. The interview dates, locations, and format (i.e., in-person interview, phone interview, or Skype interview) were arranged individually with each interviewee per his/her preference.

Interview questions focused on each participant's thoughts concerning the placement of students with disabilities in regular education classrooms versus their thoughts concerning the placement of students with autism in regular education classrooms. Prior to each interview, each participant was emailed a demographics survey (Appendix C). The completed demographics surveys were then emailed back to the researcher. This information was used to gather general information about each participant prior to the interview. Each interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes to one hour and follow up questions were asked at a later date as needed. Each interview was recorded with the participant's permission, then transcribed and coded. In addition, the participants were provided the opportunity to review drafts of the transcriptions for accuracy in order to demonstrate credibility of the data that had been collected.

At the beginning of each interview, an informal discussion was held to answer any questions the participants may have had concerning the study and to review the information the participants had provided on the demographics survey. Field notes of observations were handwritten during each interview providing additional insight into the interactions with the participants. The information recorded as field notes was helpful in recreating the interview experience, identifying points of alignment, and supporting other sources that triangulated the data. Each participant was first asked the same twenty interview questions (Appendix D). Then, each participant made placement recommendations based on information from five scenario situations. The participants had the opportunity to peruse the scenario situations prior to the

interview. If needed, follow-up questions were asked for clarification or to expand upon a topic that had emerged from the scenario situations. After all of the interviews had been completed and transcribed, the data was analyzed to search for common points of alignment within the framework.

### **Participants' Demographic Data**

Participants were selected by purposive sampling. Superintendents from school districts in western Pennsylvania were contacted to gain approval for participation in the study. Superintendents in six different school districts agreed to participate in the study. Once approval was granted, the superintendents made suggestions as to the names of principals with qualifications that met the study criteria. After the principals agreed to participate in the study, they were assigned a client identification number for organization purposes as well as for confidentiality (Figure 2).

Table 2 <i>Demographic Data for School Leaders</i>			
School Leader Number	Gender	Years as a Administrator	Years as a Teacher
P1	M	07	24
P2	M	06	17
P3	M	26	08
P4	F	13	03
P5	F	13	08
P6	M	39	14

The following profiles of the actual principals provide background information on each individual.

**P1**

P1 has been an administrator for seven years. His certifications include elementary teacher and K-12 principal. Before moving into an administrative position, P1 was a teacher for twenty-four years. He served as a high school principal for two years prior to moving into his current position. He has been an elementary principal for five years. P1 has worked as an administrator in his current district for seven years. P1 stated that he had limited training in special education through various Act 48 and Act 45 courses. The enrollment at P1's school is 400 students (grades K to 6), 10 of which have an autism diagnosis.

**P2**

P2 has been an administrator for six years. His certifications include elementary teacher, reading specialist, and K-12 principal. Prior to moving into administration, P2 was a teacher for seventeen years. He has been an elementary principal for six years. P2 has worked in his current district as an administrator for six years. Although P2 is not certified in special education, he served as the instruction support teacher at his school for five years. The enrollment at P2's school is 630 students (grades K to 6), 13 of which have an autism diagnosis.

**P3**

P3 has been an administrator for twenty-six years. His certifications include physical education teacher and K-12 principal. Prior to moving into

administration, P3 was a teacher for eight years. He served as a high school principal for thirteen years prior to moving into his current position. He has been an elementary principal for thirteen years. P3 has worked as an administrator in his current district for twenty-six years. P3 stated that he had no formal training in special education. He is certified in adaptive aquatics. The enrollment at P3's school is 273 students (grades 1 to 5), 7 of which have an autism diagnosis.

#### **P4**

P4 has been an administrator for thirteen years. Her certifications include elementary teacher and K-12 principal (both in Texas and in Pennsylvania). Prior to moving into administration, P4 was a teacher for three years. She served as an elementary principal in Texas for three years prior to moving into her current position where she has been an elementary principal for ten years. P4 has worked as an administrator in her current district for ten years. P4 stated that she had no formal training in special education, but has had emotional support, life skills, and autism classes from the Intermediate Unit housed in her schools during her time there. P4 is the principal of three different schools. The enrollment at P4's schools is 89 students (grades K to 3), 78 students (grades K to 3), and 147 students (grades K to 3). A total of 5 students have an autism diagnosis.

#### **P5**

P5 has been an administrator for thirteen years. Her certifications include elementary teacher, reading specialist, K-12 principal, and superintendent eligibility letter. Prior to moving into administration, P5 was a teacher for eight

years. She served as a director of education for eight years prior to moving into her current position. She has been an elementary principal for five years. P5 has worked as an administrator in her current district for five years. P5 stated that she had limited training in special education through various workshops. The enrollment at P5's school is 444 students (grades K to 6), 4 of which have an autism diagnosis.

## **P6**

P6 has been an administrator for thirty-nine years. His certifications include science, social studies, K-12 principal, and superintendent eligibility letter. Prior to moving into administration, P6 was a teacher for fourteen years. He served as a high school principal at a private school for nineteen years prior to moving to public school. P6 has worked as an administrator in his current district for twenty years. He was a middle school principal for six years. He has been an elementary principal for fourteen years. P6 stated that he has no training in special education. He is the principal of two elementary schools. The enrollment at P6's first school is 130 students (grades K to 6) and his other school has 250 students (grades K to 6). In both buildings, there are a total of 3 students who have an autism diagnosis.

## **Narrative Analysis of Interview Questions and Scenario Situations**

Interviews with six administrators yielded common points of alignment within each response to provide insight to each principal's approach to the placement of students with disabilities, and more specifically students with autism, in regular education classrooms. Once a point of alignment emerged,



the researcher categorized responses according to each point. The three main points of alignment that materialized were:

- that principals made placement recommendations based on a case by case basis and not strictly on a diagnosis;
- that inclusion not only benefitted the students with autism but also their general education peers;
- and that limited knowledge and experiences with inclusion and autism are barriers for many administrators in their placement recommendations.

### **Principals' Responses to Interview Questions**

The following are responses to the questions and supporting statements:

*Interview Question 1:*

*Do you have personal experience with a special education student (i.e., a relative or close friend)? Describe.*

Of the respondents, four stated that they had no personal experience with a special education student and two stated that they did have personal experience with a special education student. P1 recalled experiences with his childhood friend's brother, who back then had been categorized as mentally retarded. P1 thought this young man may have had some characteristics of autism too. He stated that these early encounters with a person who had special needs helped him build up a comfort level, "...I just got used to him. He was one of the guys." P3 worked with special education students in aquatic settings. At the time, he was a physical education teacher. He described a program that he

had developed where he and some other educators taught academics in the pool to students who had an autism diagnosis.

There was this one student who would get in the pool and be relaxed. In the classroom though, he would just stim, stim, stim. We used to do addition and subtraction, number identification and letter identification. We had ping pong balls with everything on them. Since they float, we could use them as manipulatives. We would introduce reading and math concepts in the pool. Then, they would be reinforced in the classroom. It was a great experience. I'd like to go back to it when I retire. **P3**

*Interview Question 2:*

*What are your thoughts regarding the notion that students with disabilities have a basic right to receive their education in regular education classrooms?*

All of the administrators were familiar with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the rights of special education students. A determination of what is most appropriate for each student must be made. Whenever possible, all students should be included and educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Thus, the students with disabilities should receive their education alongside their typical peers in regular classrooms. Only when it has been determined that the student is not achieving as he should is it appropriate to move him from the regular education classroom to a special education classroom. All six respondents agreed that students have the right to be educated in regular education classrooms.

I definitely agree. I feel that in the regular education classrooms the

standards are higher for all students. I think that special education students need to be in the regular education classrooms as much as possible. **P4**

Some stated that disruptive behaviors by some students could interfere with the learning of others. In those cases, the disruptive students should be placed in more appropriate classroom settings. I feel that that is wonderful...not a problem as long as the behavior does not interfere. I've been in situations where the behaviors interfered so much that it really hindered education of everyone else. **P5**

And that's the conundrum. They have the right. They certainly do and I would support that. But sometimes they just...the abilities just aren't there. **P1**

I believe in FAPE. I really do. I think that everyone has a right to a free and appropriate education. Within that...I'm going to cop out on you. I really believe that you have to go on a case by case basis. To make a blanket statement that every child belongs or has the right to be in the classroom...no. I think that right has to stop if they're disruptive to the other students in that classroom. You know, as long as the classroom can function and as long as the help is provided in that classroom, then yes. **P3**

*Interview Question 3:*

*Do you think that the achievement level of general education students will decrease if students with disabilities are placed in general education classrooms? Explain.*

The respondents, for the most part, agreed that the achievement level of the general education students would not decrease if students with disabilities were placed in general education classrooms. Multiple administrators mentioned that it would be beneficial for the regular education students to learn with their special education peers.

I would say that most students with disabilities could be integrated into the classroom with little disruption to the regular education students. As a matter of fact, if used properly it can help the regular education students develop empathetic views of people who are different from themselves.

**P3**

No, I don't. I think that inclusive classrooms are like real life situations.

**P4**

I don't believe that. I believe that they can be role models and assist students who have special education needs. And when they are role models, or assisting, that always helps the students acquire and learn skills too. **P5**

Not necessarily. I don't see that being the case at all. During the twenty some years that I was teaching, I had EMR and Life Skills students who were mainstreamed into my classes. They were there for most of the day and it was beneficial to them. It never hindered any of my other students.

**P1**

I think that they could increase. It can be a touchy situation. We need to be educating the rest of the kids. There has to be a delicate way to let the other kids know so that they can deal with the possible disruptions. **P2**

*Interview Question 4:*

*Do you think that the achievement level of general education students will decrease if students with autism are placed in general education classrooms? Explain.*

When considering the same question about the achievement level of the general education student, but with the inclusion of students with autism, the respondents agreed that it depended upon the severity of the diagnosis.

I think that there's a true benefit for both sides...if the student can function within a classroom setting without being highly disruptive. But, the minute that it becomes so disruptive that it stops the other children from learning, then it's not appropriate. **P3**

I think that autistic students may be academically higher than some students in regular education. So, they can even be role models for those

students where academics are concerned. **P5**

The students that are in our CLM (Competent Learner Model) class...even if we included them with support (an aide), I think that there's no question that the students in the regular classroom would be set back. This is just because of the nature of those kids. However, we have a number of kids who are in learning support who have autism. We have a wide spectrum of students. Those kids are in regular education classes and they don't diminish what's going on in the regular classroom. **P1**

*Interview Question 5:*

*Do you think that the achievement levels of students with disabilities would increase if they were placed in the general classroom? Explain.*

The respondents had mixed views concerning the idea that achievement levels of students would increase if students with disabilities were placed in general education classrooms.

I definitely do – without a doubt. I have a situation right now with emotional support students. We are really pushing the special education department to have them included in regular education classes. **P4**

Yes, I think these students need to be included – especially at the elementary level when they're developing their oral language. They need to have lots of experience with better role models so that they can improve their receptive and expressive language skills.

I think that there's a fine line, but boy it could really help some students...depending upon their needs. There's also the other side that the work might be too far above their level. They would probably benefit more from having instruction at their level. If it's too far above their level, I don't know if it would really be a benefit to them. **P5**

The structure of the special education classroom is sometimes a hindrance to the development of some special education students. Those that are at a higher level could succeed in the regular classroom. **P6**

One of the respondents did not think that the special education students would have any increase in their achievement level if they were included in the regular education classroom.

I believe that we have the label special needs because the children have special needs. And I think that a program designed for a child with special needs that is conducted with rigorous standards for that child and fidelity will yield better educational results than just being placed in the regular classroom. I believe that special education has to be more intensive than a regular classroom and more specific. If it is, it should yield greater benefits for that student than just being in regular education. **P3**

*Interview Question 6:*

*Do you think that the achievement levels of students with autism would increase if they were placed in the general classroom? Explain.*

The respondents had similar thoughts concerning questions 5 and 6. They did not see much of a difference between the general category of special education students versus the category of students with autism.

I've seen it go both ways. I'm thinking of a little guy we had who had high functioning autism. He had an autistic label and yet he did great in the classroom. And, the classroom was the only place where I wanted him. I didn't feel like he needed any special help or adaptations. He did great. If it's a student who is not as high functioning, I'm not so sure that they would be successful. I mean, there's certainly going to be some incidental learning. Whenever you put a child in a classroom, there's going to be incidental learning. But, if they're low functioning, aren't we better off meeting that child where they are? To meet him at his instructional level and give him specially designed instruction? **P3**

Sure – as long as we make sure that there isn't a huge gap between what's being taught and what their level is. **P5**

Yes, I think that they would. I think that classroom teachers have very high expectations for all students. **P4**

The typical student with autism....sure his levels would go up. **P1**



*Interview Question 7:*

*Do you think that students with disabilities would increase social skills by interacting with general education students? Explain.*

The majority of the respondents agreed that social skills would increase if students with disabilities were given opportunities to interact with general education students.

Yes, because I think that they would have a larger variety of interactions with the regular education students and can see those students with other regular education students. I think it would be a positive experience. **P4**

Yes, due to modeling. They sure do. **P1**

I think that's the most important part of putting kids in general education. I don't know if you noticed Bob (not his real name) on the playground on your way in. He's a boy who was burnt in a house fire on over eighty percent of his body and has some physical limitations. I can't imagine keeping him separate from the other kids. Our kids have to learn to develop a tolerance and empathy for kids who have disabilities. **P3**

Yes, I think that it is....when we place students or use the inclusionary model, one of the things we're really focusing on is improving social skills. I believe that by being surrounded by peers who have appropriate social behaviors, students are provided good role models. This can influence

the special needs children. **P5**

I would imagine that they would increase. I think it's important for kids to be included. They should have opportunities to develop socially within a classroom environment. These special education students need to have opportunities to have social experiences with different types of kids – not just with kids with IEPs. **P2**

One respondent did not think that there would be improvement in social skills if students with disabilities had opportunities to interact with general education students.

I think that it's a toss-up because my experience is that a larger percentage of students that have disabilities either are unable to work socially with others or the others are not willing to work with them. **P6**

*Interview Question 8:*

*Do you think that students with autism would increase social skills by interacting with general education students? Explain.*

All of the respondents thought that the social skills of the students diagnosed with autism would increase by interacting with general education students.

Yes. The only hindrance or encumbrance with our autistic students seems to be the size of the group. You know, the noise levels, how comfortable they feel...they don't like those big groups. Yes, their social

skills do increase. **P1**

I think the benefit is to the student with autism because obviously part of the autism spectrum is that the student lacks social skills, which is one of the identifying characteristics. You have to put these students in social situations and let them see appropriate social behaviors. **P3**

Yes. I believe that because I honestly believe that in a work place will be people who are on the spectrum of autism. And they are going to work and interact with and have to have an understanding of what is this diagnosis and how can I relate to this person? **P3**

*Interview Question 9:*

*Do you think that behavior management problems of students would increase and academic standards would be jeopardized if students with disabilities were placed in regular education classes? Explain.*

One of the respondents thought that behavior management problems would increase, thus causing problems for achievement.

I just can't see how it would benefit the total structure and reduce problems. It would have to increase problems based on the teachers either being unable to handle the situation or just being overwhelmed by the situation. **P6**

The other respondents agreed that there might be behavioral issues, but their consensus was that the classroom teachers could deal with those issues appropriately.

No. I don't think so. I think you need to look at the behavior...say it's a student who has tactile issues. This student needs to have something in his hands. Even though we may not let the other children have the same accommodation, it's still a modification that we could make in the classroom to help him be successful. I don't think it's a problem. **P2**

It depends on the behavior issues. A lot of times we can deal with behavior management problems. I think that the other students know that a certain type of behavior is wrong. A behavior issue that you know is minimal....we can deal with that. **P5**

I feel that if there is a disruptive student in class, then that student should go to another classroom to de-escalate, so as not to keep the entire class off-kilter. If that occurs, the academic standards won't be jeopardized. **P4**

Only in the most extreme cases do I think the behavior has a negative effect on achievement in the classroom for everybody. In ninety percent of the cases, a child can be re-directed so it doesn't impact the academic standards. **P3**

*Interview Question 10:*

*Do you think that behavior management problems of students would increase and academic standards would be jeopardized if students with autism were placed in regular education classes? Explain.*

Two of the respondents stated that they did not foresee a problem with behavior management issues increasing or with the academic standards being jeopardized if students with autism were placed in regular education classes.

I think that the problems do increase. Again, it's the nature of the student. We kind of have these two extremes of autism. We have kids who function very well and we have those that just don't – due to their being non-verbal. So, yes, the problems would increase. How much depends upon the students. **P1**

No. The regular education teachers know their students. They know to have visual reminders and visual schedules for these students. I think that they're very mindful of these strategies. **P4**

The other respondents did not see a difference between the behavior management problems that might arise with a general category of students with disabilities compared to students who have an autism diagnosis.

*Interview Question 11:*

*What are your thoughts regarding regular education teachers and their comfort level regarding the implementation of individual educational plans if students with disabilities are placed in general education classrooms?*

For the most part, the respondents felt that their faculty was comfortable with the implementation of IEPs if they had special education students assigned to their classrooms.

The staff that I work with does an excellent job of that. **P6**

Here they are very comfortable with it. We have special education teachers who do a really nice job of printing out an outline of the IEP. This gives a summary of the information that the classroom teacher really needs to know. **P5**

The teachers know what is expected of them in the regular education classes. They know what to do with adaptations. I think they are really good with that. **P4**

I think that the regular education teachers have some degree of anxiety over highly needy students – just as the principal does. For the most part, as long as they are provided with the support they need, they are comfortable with implementing IEPs. When they're out there on an island by themselves with no support though, they're not. **P3**

Our teachers are very comfortable with it. I guess it's because for years we've seen kids in the IU classes that we've hosted. It's kind of been forced upon us. You're either comfortable, or you're going to struggle. With our new hires, we make sure that one of their skills is dealing with students who have IEPs. They have to be comfortable. **P1**

*Interview Question 12:*

*Do you believe that it is possible for students with disabilities to have their individual goals met in regular education classrooms? Explain.*

The majority of the respondents believe that goals for students with disabilities can be met in regular education classrooms.

Absolutely! We've done it for years. And again, it depends on the student. The support from home means a lot too. **P1**

Yes – the high functioning students; low functioning students, probably not. **P3**

Yes. In my building, grades 4, 5, and 6 are inclusionary. We use a co-teaching model. I put a special education teacher in the class with the kids. We have a special education teacher for each grade level. The special education teacher stays in the regular classroom all day and assists with instruction. **P2**

A few of the principals, though, made it clear that some students have goals that are too low to be met in regular education classrooms.

Yes, but it depends on the goals. I do think that there are some kids who have academic goals that are too low for the regular education classroom.

**P5**

I think it depends on what the individual goals of the students are. If you have a student with an IEP reading at two levels below the third grade level, then he would absolutely need learning support (in a pull-out resource room) and interventions to help catch him up. **P4**

*Interview Question 13:*

*Do you believe that it is possible for students with autism to have their individual goals met in regular education classrooms? Explain.*

All of the respondents stated that they thought the individual goals of students with autism could be met in regular education classrooms

Yes, but it depends on wherever they fall on the autism spectrum. **P3**

Yes. My experience has been that the students with autism have more success with their academic goals in the regular education classroom. Especially with the Asperger type kids – their behavior is the issue, not their academics. **P5**

Yes, I think they can. Our extreme students go to the CLM classroom. **P2**



*Interview Question 14:*

*Do you believe that there are some special educational services that need to be delivered in a separate classroom to meet all goals in the individual education plans for students with disabilities? If so, what are those services?*

All of the respondents identified special education services that they believed would need to be delivered in a separate classroom to meet the goals in the individual education plans for students with disabilities.

I support having a Life Skills classroom. I think that it is an example of where a separate classroom is needed to meet all goals. The biggest thing is that these students get one-on-one support. It's a better environment for some of the equipment that is needed too. **P5**

I think a student should receive instruction in a separate classroom when they are a couple of grade levels below the core reading program or the math program. Some other needs in the classroom might be kids with toileting problems and other kinds of things. **P2**

If a student is far behind in reading, then he should receive individualized instruction that addresses the student's learning disability. We have special education because some kids need a special way to learn. I think it would be the same for math too. Most kids can get the science and social studies from listening. **P3**

*Interview Question 15:*

*Do you think that it is possible for the achievement level of all students to increase if children with disabilities are placed in general education classrooms?*

Most of the respondents stated that they thought the achievement level of all students could increase if children with disabilities are placed in general education classrooms.

Yes I do. Again, depending on what the students' IEPs are. If it's appropriate and if they aren't frustrated – then definitely. **P4**

Yes – I have faith in the teachers. **P6**

It could. If you look at Bloom's Taxonomy...if a student knows how to do something then a higher level is to be able to use that knowledge in an application and explain it to someone else. So, the student takes a concept they he just learned and explains it to another student. It's not just helping the other student. It's really helping both students. **P2**

I believe that the achievement level can increase – but, it depends on the instruction in the classroom. If it's hands-on, then I think it provides a better avenue for an increase. If it's pure lecture, all students have difficulty with these classes. A hands-on, interactive classroom can be very meaningful for all students. **P5**

One respondent disagreed. He thought the achievement level could decrease. That's kind of a broad question. Not really. But likewise, I don't think that they'll decrease. I don't know if you can just tie them together like that. **P1**

*Interview Question 16:*

*Do you think that it is possible for the achievement level of all students to increase if children with autism are placed in general education classrooms?*

All of the respondents stated that they thought the achievement level of all students would increase if children with autism are placed in general education classrooms.

As long as it's a proper and appropriate placement, I think that the students can benefit. We have some high functioning students with autism who are brilliant. One fifth grade boy in particular is a great reader. There are a lot of bright kids in his class who can work with him and be accelerated along with him. So, he can pull them along academically and they can pull him along socially. **P3**

Last year, we had a boy with autism in sixth grade. He is incredibly intelligent. He reads well. His writing is remarkable. He's one of the top scorers in math. **P1**

*Interview Question 17:*

*What are your thoughts regarding the notion that regular education teachers prefer sending their students with disabilities to special education pull out*

*programs rather than have special education teachers deliver services in the regular education classrooms?*

All of the respondents had similar ideas concerning the notion that regular education teachers prefer sending their students with disabilities to special education pull out programs rather than have the special education teachers deliver the services in the regular education classrooms.

I've seen a dramatic change in that over the past eight to ten years. At first, all I heard was, "They've got to get out." Lately, it's a rare occasion when I hear a comment like that. So, there's really been a big change over the past ten years. **P6**

We're continuously trying to promote the idea that he's not just your student because you're the special education teacher. They are our students. They are everyone's students. I'm seeing improvement in that area little by little...**P5**

Yes. It still seems to be true that some of our older teachers don't like the disruptions in the room. **P2**

Some of our teachers sell themselves short. They think that they can't deliver the lesson in a way that they could get through to the student. Actually, I think that we're pretty strong in that regard. But, I've still seen times when a staff member is reluctant to take the responsibility. They

just want to push it off. I hate to generalize, but it's some of the older teachers who have that attitude. These teachers have done it for so long that they're locked into a way of teaching. They know the way we're doing it now, but it's not in their comfort zone. They are trying to change though. Some of them just aren't sure of their abilities. And...they don't want to shoulder the responsibility. **P1**

I know that some teachers would absolutely prefer having the students go with a special education teacher in another classroom. Without a doubt, some teachers would prefer that. But, in our district, inclusion is the way of our world. **P4**

Absolutely. When I was regular education teacher, I remember thinking, "Isn't that what why we have that room down the hall?" I think we've made some strides, but we aren't there yet. Most regular education teachers would rather leave special needs teaching to the special education teachers. **P3**

*Interview Question 18:*

*Do you think that there are certain disabilities that could be included in regular education classes if accommodations are made and adequate support is given to the teachers? List those disabilities.*

The respondents described a variety of disabilities that could be included in regular education classes if accommodations are made and adequate support is given to teachers.

You know, students with vision issues. We can give them materials with large print. Kids who need occupational therapy or physical therapy. We can make accommodations for those students in the classroom. Some behavioral things – I mean if they aren't too extreme -- there are some management techniques that can be used in the classroom. Yes, you might need some additional support in the classroom...maybe a personal care aide...but I think that we should preserve the classroom as much as possible. We'll do all of those things before we look at pulling the student out. **P2**

We've had a variety of different disabilities – visual impairments, hearing issues, a traumatic brain injury. I think that you really need to look at the disability and find the best way that the regular education classroom can work to meet the needs of the child. **P5**

Yes. I think that any minor disorder can be accommodated. We have a student who is a burn victim. He has an extreme physical disability, but he's fine in the classroom. **P3**

Yes and we're doing it. A speech therapist comes in and works with the

students. Special education teachers push into different classes to work with students. **P6**

It depends on the students' academic levels. I think students with specific learning disabilities, students with autism, students with emotional support issues, and some life skills students can all be included in regular education classes for some portion of the day. You know...to as much extent as possible. I think that all students should have an opportunity to learn with their regular education peers. **P3**

We have a variety of IU classes at our school. So, emotional support students and life skills students are out in the regular education classes at every opportunity that we can provide. **P1**

*Interview Question 19:*

*How would you describe your experience with the inclusion of special education students in regular education classes?*

The respondents had a variety of experience with the inclusion of special education students in regular education classes. That was not surprising though, since they have a wide variety of experience in their teaching and administrative careers.

At one time, I had a co-teaching classroom. I co-taught with a special education teacher. It was a good experience. We changed roles. I didn't always have to be the lead classroom teacher. Some days, the special

education teacher delivered the instruction to the whole group. I think it was important for the kids to see that they didn't always have to go to the special education teacher. Also, in my time as the instructional support teacher for my school....so I was the gatekeeper for special education. I had to make sure that all possible interventions and strategies that could be delivered within the classroom were being delivered before anyone even thought of placing a student in special education. **P2**

When I was a teacher at a middle school in Texas (about thirteen years ago), there was very little inclusion at that point. It was an urban school district and inclusion was not popular. It wasn't really an option, so it didn't happen. **P4**

I think it's been a learning process. When I came on board at the middle school we didn't have it. So, we set our curriculum and our schedule based on that. And, as I was educated in the concept, the more I experienced I became. I began to understand it better. I still have some difficulties in my own mind with some of the procedures, but overall it's been an educational process over the last fifteen years. **P6**

It's been generally favorable. In very few instances have we had to separate out students. **P3**



I was in a huge school district down in Houston, TX. My students were in the Chapter 1 class – which is now Title I. I was a naïve teacher who had just gotten out of school. I was told that these kids need some extra help. I taught them....I followed the curriculum. I didn't have low expectations for the students. I remember having comments from my principal about how pleased he was that I kept the kids on grade level. In my naïve mind though, I didn't understand that I wouldn't do that. And that's been a life lesson for me because they could do it just as I expected them to. I didn't have any other expectations for them and that's how they performed. I had those high expectations for all of my students. **P5**

When I started teaching in the early 1980s, I taught third grade. The next year I taught fifth grade. There were a lot of emotional support kids in the intermediate grades. I got them. They were in my classroom. They were usually boys. It was trial by fire. I learned by doing. I had no training. I helped them stay on task. They did what they needed for me. So, I would say that I gained extensive experience. **P1**

*Interview Question 20:*

*How would you describe your experience with the inclusion of special education students diagnosed with autism in regular education classes?*

There was a mixed reaction regarding the participants' experiences with the inclusion of special education students diagnosed with autism in regular

education classes. Most of the participants gave accounts of their experience when they were still teaching. All of the participants stated that they have not had what they determined as an extensive number of students with autism attending their schools.

When I was teaching, I don't remember any kids with an autism diagnosis. Isn't that weird? It really wasn't that long ago. I just don't remember the term being used. Since then though, we've really come a long way in understanding what to do to best teach those students....but we're still a long way off. Each student with autism has different needs. **P2**

Back when I was teaching we didn't know anything about autism. I'm learning much more now. **P3**

In my buildings, it's been pretty rare. I can only think of one time when it's been a problem. And....that exception wasn't the child but the parents. **P6**

I think that eighty percent of the children with autism belong in a regular education classroom. They should be in regular education classes so that they can interact with the other students. But again, if their behavior is such that it disrupts the entire classroom, then you can't do it. I guess that's my one problem with so much of what we do...we try to put down policies where one size fits all. It's funny because in education we talk out

of both sides of our mouth...differentiation, differentiation,  
differentiation...but for all kids it just doesn't work. **P3**

Now that the common points of alignment have been gleaned from the interview questions, the data will be analyzed from a comparative perspective. First, the principals' views concerning students with disabilities versus students with autism are studied. Next, the principals' experience as a teacher versus their experience as an administrator is discussed. Finally, the principals' comments in conjunction with Bandura's social learning theory are noted.

### **Comparative Analysis of Data**

During the interviews, the participants were asked a series of questions. They were first asked about their attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education classrooms. Next, they were asked about their attitudes toward the inclusion of students with autism in regular education classrooms.

#### **Comparing the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities to the Inclusion of Students with Autism**

The interview questions were asked in a set order to gauge the principals' views on inclusion for a generic grouping of students with disabilities versus their views on inclusion for students with autism. The participants were first asked questions that pertained to the general category of students with disabilities and then asked the same questions with the focus on students with autism.

*Questions 3 and 4: The effect on the achievement level of the regular education students (i.e., increase or decrease)*

When responding to the question directed at the generic category of students with disabilities, the participants made no mention about the severity of the students' disabilities. The participants did not think that the achievement level of the regular education students would decrease if students with disabilities were included in the regular education classes. On the other hand, multiple respondents stated that the success of the regular education students depended on the severity of the diagnosis of autism of the included student(s). Thus, if a student's autism diagnosis was more severe, it could have a negative effect on the achievement level of the regular education students.

*Questions 5 and 6: The effect on the achievement level of the identified students (i.e., increase or decrease)*

The principals did not differentiate in their responses to questions 5 and 6. Their answers did not indicate that they perceived any difference in the impact on the achievement level of the identified students, whether they were labeled with a learning disability or with an autism diagnosis.

*Questions 7 and 8: The effect on social skills development on the identified students (i.e., increase or decrease)*

The participants agreed that social skills would increase for both categories of students: students with disabilities and students with autism. There was no discernable difference in the responses to questions 7 and 8. The principals agreed that inclusion was a definite benefit for students in the area of social skill development.

*Questions 9 and 10: The effect on behavior management issues and on the academic standards (i.e., increase or decrease)*

The responses of the participants were similar when describing their thoughts regarding behavior management issues and academic standards. With both disability groups, the majority of the principals stated that behavior management would not be of particular concern because the teachers would have appropriate strategies to handle situations they might face in dealing with problem behaviors from both the students with disabilities and the students with autism. In addition, the majority of the respondents stated that they did not think the academic standards would be jeopardized if either disability group was included in a regular education classroom.

*Questions 12 and 13: The effect on having individual IEP goals met*

The participants made similar comments regarding their teachers' ability to meet their special education students' IEP goals in the regular education classroom. They did not see a difference in meeting the goals of the students with disabilities versus the students with autism. The principals believed that their teachers would adequately address the IEP goals for any student that was included in a regular education classroom.

*Questions 15 and 16: The effect on the achievement level of all of the students (i.e., increase or decrease)*

The majority of the participants stated that they believed the achievement level of all of the students in the classroom would increase if students with disabilities were included. The principals did not differentiate between students

with disabilities and students with autism. They made positive statements concerning the impact of effective instruction on all students.

*Questions 19 and 20: Compared personal experiences with the different groups*

The participants admitted to having more experience with students with disabilities than with students with autism, especially when they were still teaching. The principals recognized that only in the past few years have they started to gain more experience with students with autism.

After considering the principals' different answers to the comparison questions listed above, it became apparent that the elementary principals did not indicate that they had differing viewpoints when discussing the general category of students with disabilities versus students with autism. The only precursor to showing a difference between the two categories of students was when the participants were asked if the achievement level of the other regular education students would decrease. The principals were not concerned with the severity of the disability of the non-autistic students. None of the principals discussed that there might be different levels of severity when it came to the general description of disabilities. When it came to an autism diagnosis though, the principals made mention of severity. They were concerned that students with severe autism may cause the achievement level of the other students to decrease.

### **Teaching Experience versus Administrative Experience**

The participants' responses to the questions were analyzed based on their years of experience as a teacher versus their years of experience as an administrator. The principals who were interviewed for this study fell into distinct

categories: those with less than ten years of teaching experience (P3, P4, and P5); those with eleven to twenty years of teaching experience (P2 and P6); and those with twenty-one to thirty years of teaching experience (P1). Based on the responses that the principals gave to the interview questions, it became apparent that principals with different levels of teaching experience prior to becoming an elementary principal had differing opinions relating to the inclusion of students with disabilities, and more specifically with autism, in regular education classrooms.

Those principals who had fewer years of teaching experience made statements that illustrated attitudes that were more inclusive of students with disabilities, including autism. Due to the responses made by these principals, it became evident that these individuals would locate the necessary supports to make a more inclusive placement successful for students with autism. For example, therapeutic staff support (TSS) assistance, social skill practice with a guidance counselor, or Title I support for improvement in reading comprehension.

The principals who had shorter teaching careers prior to moving into administrative positions made statements that illustrated attitudes that were more restrictive when it came to including students with autism and other disabilities. Due to their responses, these principals illustrated that they were less willing to support fully inclusive placements for students with autism. These school leaders made comments alluding to their concerns regarding the behavioral issues that can be associated with students with autism. It seemed as if these

administrators believed that if these students were placed in special education pull-out classes, then they would not be a detriment to the education of the regular education students. Therefore, they were more likely to believe that students with autism should not be fully included in regular education classrooms.

### **Principals' Comments in Conjunction with Bandura's Social Learning Theory**

The participants made a number of comments about the symbiotic relationship that occurs between the regular education students and the students with disabilities, including autism, when those students were included in regular education classrooms. In his social learning theory, Bandura stated that people learn new behaviors through observational learning of the social factors in their environment. The principals stated that it was important for the students with autism to be in social settings with the regular education students so that they would have the opportunity to improve their social skills. By observing their regular education peers, the students with autism would be more likely to model, imitate, and adopt the appropriate social behaviors themselves. The principals also made comments pertaining to the gains that the regular education students made due to their increased contact with the students with autism. The principals claimed that some of the students with autism were outstanding in the area of academics. These students served as leaders at times and thus contributed to the improvement of academic gains in general education classrooms.



The interview response data has been analyzed through four different focus levels: principals' common and conflicting opinions; principals' views concerning students with disabilities versus students with autism; principals' experience as a teacher versus their experience as an administrator; principals' comments in conjunction with Bandura's social learning theory.

### **Scenario Placement Recommendations**

After gaining a better understanding of the attitudes and experiences of the principals, the researcher moved to ascertain if these attitudes were applied when making placement recommendations for students who depicted characteristics often associated with students with autism. Each participant received the scenario descriptions via electronic mail prior to the interview. The principals read the following descriptions and selected the answer that best fit his/her recommendation for placement if this child was a student within his/her school community. The student profiles did not contain complete information on each student. The participants made their selections given only this information and information each person had regarding his/her own school building(s). After the participant has made his/her recommendations, there was a discussion regarding the participant's reasoning for making his/her recommendation.

- 1. Joey is a primary student whose profile of cognitive development is uneven; his IQ was tested at 110. He demonstrates reading recognition ability at above grade level but has delays in reading comprehension. He has a short attention span and can demonstrate some hyperactivity particularly in large groups. Joey has few friends; he has trouble relating*

*to peers. He is easily distracted when he is given verbal directions.*

*Teachers report that he has little interest in or reaction to praise.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *I would recommend placement in a regular education class in our building.*

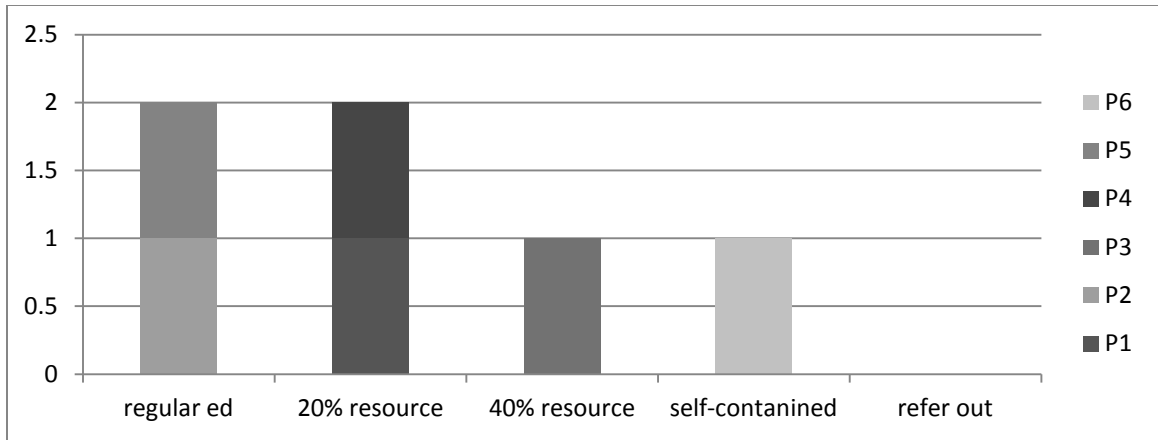
\_\_\_\_\_ *I would recommend placement in regular education with resource room assistance for 20% of the day.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *I would recommend placement in one of our regular education classes with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the school day.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *I would recommend placement in a self-contained special education classroom in our building.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *I would not be comfortable recommending programming for this child in our building and think that the Director of Special Education should refer this case to our Intermediate Unit or an outside agency.*

- P2 and P5 chose to place Joey in a regular education classroom.
- P1 and P4 chose to place Joey in regular education with resource room assistance for 20% of the day.
- P3 chose to place Joey in a regular education classroom with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the school day.
- P6 chose to place Joey in a self-contained special education classroom in his building.



*Figure 1* Placement recommendations for Joey.

The principals with lesser experience, both as teachers and as administrators, made a less restrictive placement recommendation for Joey. The two principals with the most experience made the most restrictive placement recommendation for Joey.

2. *Julie is a primary student with communication difficulties. She does not initiate communication; however, she can use complete sentences when addressed directly. She does not have a hearing loss but may seem to ignore the teachers' and students' attempts to speak with her and at times may seem overly sensitive to loud noises. Julie's parents report that she prefers to play alone and never interacts with the neighborhood children even though they have attempted to take her to play groups. Teachers also report that she wants to perform certain activities in an exact order and resists change. She can read and has some writing ability but is well below grade level.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *I would recommend placement in a regular education class in*

*our building.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *I would recommend placement in regular education with resource room assistance for 20% of the day.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *I would recommend placement in one of our regular education classes with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the school day.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *I would recommend placement in a self-contained special education classroom in our building.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *I would not be comfortable recommending programming for this child in our building and think that the Director of Special Education should refer this case to our Intermediate Unit or an outside agency.*

- P1 chose to place Julie in a regular education class in his building. In addition, he stated that he would recommend Title I intervention.
- P2, P3, P4, and P5 chose to place Julie in regular education with resource room assistance for 20% of the day.
- P6 chose to place Julie in a regular education class with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the school day.

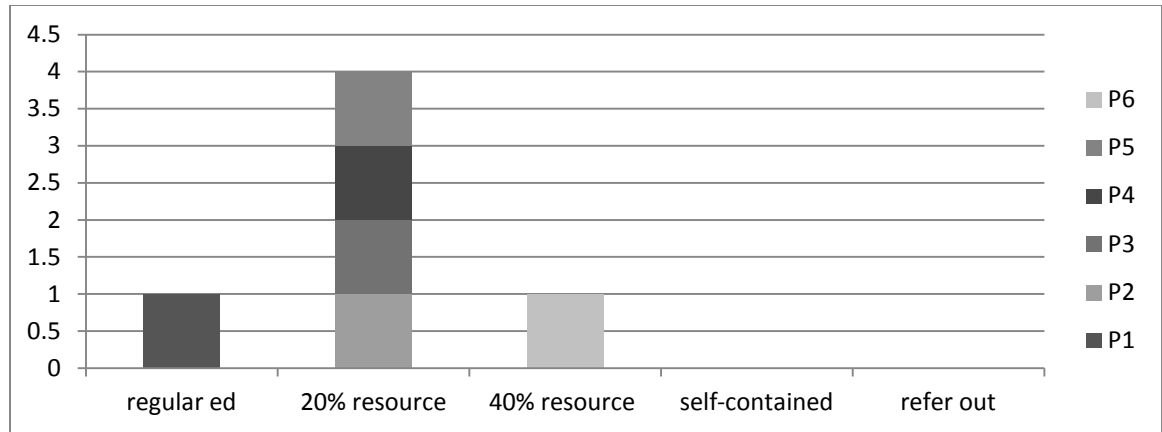


Figure 2 Placement recommendations for Julie.

The administrator with the most experience made the most restrictive placement recommendation for Julie.

3. *Peter is an intermediate student. He loves to read books and responds well to a structured environment. Peter demonstrates a particular interest in logos or the labels on clothing. He may notice a person's clothing with little interest in the person wearing the clothes. He may wander off during instructional down time unless he is very well supervised. He does not show any interest in peers at home or at school. In the previous school, he was given one to one supervision to keep him on task. Peter eats a restricted diet. Sensory integration techniques have shown some success to keep him calm and ready for instruction. Peter is stressed and uncomfortable for much of the time in the classroom setting. He has difficulty following directions and resists instruction. Peter may repeat words or phrases that appear to have special meaning to him.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *I would recommend placement in a regular education class in*

*our building.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *I would recommend placement in regular education with resource room assistance for 20% of the day.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *I would recommend placement in one of our regular education classes with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the school day.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *I would recommend placement in a self-contained special education classroom in our building.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *I would not be comfortable recommending programming for this child in our building and think that the Director of Special Education should refer this case to our Intermediate Unit or an outside agency.*

- P1 chose to place Peter in a regular education class in his building. In addition, he stated that he would work to acquire a therapeutic staff support (TSS) service for Peter.
- P6 chose to place Peter in regular education with resource room assistance for 20% of the day.
- P2, P3, and P5 chose to place Peter in a regular education classroom with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the school day.
- P4 chose to place Peter in a self-contained special education classroom in her building.

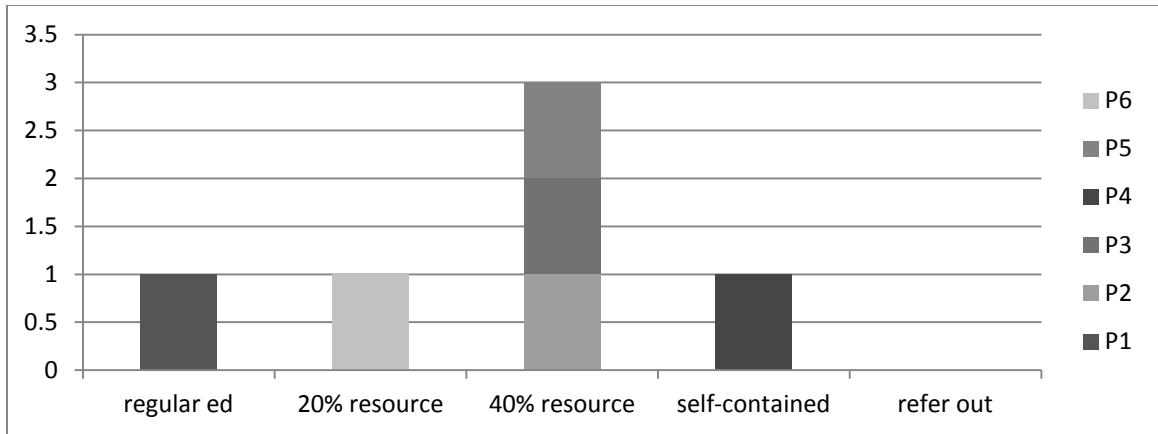


Figure 3 Placement recommendations for Peter.

The placement recommendations for Peter did not follow the pattern that was established in the first two scenario situations. The principal with the most experience made a less restrictive placement recommendation for Peter. The principals with lesser experience made more restrictive placement recommendations.

4. *Tommy is an intermediate student and an above average reader and has an extensive vocabulary. He is very talkative but tries to direct all conversation to his interest of trains. He is very knowledgeable in the history and construction of trains and train tracks. He is very interested in his peers but often seems too domineering in his social interactions and so his peers tend to avoid him. He tends to get into other people's physical space and does not notice when others are upset or hurt. Tommy's math skills are also above average for calculations; however, he has difficulty with word problems. Tommy has some difficulty following teacher directions unless they are written on the board and are very*

*simple. He is easily distracted and therefore has trouble completing activities on time.*

*\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in a regular education class in our building.*

*\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in regular education with resource room assistance for 20% of the day.*

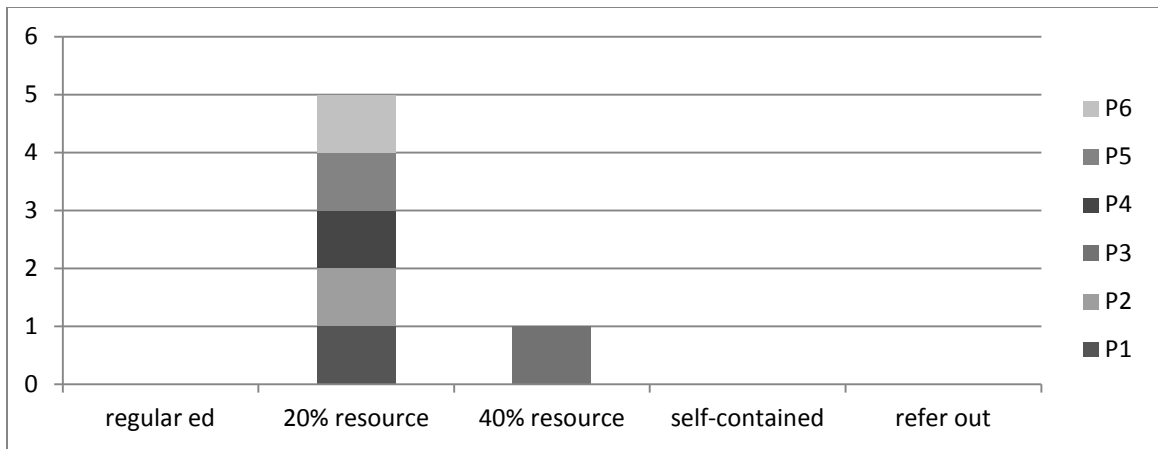
*\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in one of our regular education classes with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the school day.*

*\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in a self-contained special education classroom in our building.*

*\_\_\_\_\_ I would not be comfortable recommending programming for this child in our building and think that the Director of Special Education should refer this case to our Intermediate Unit or an outside agency.*

- P1, P2, P4, P5, and P6 chose to place Tommy in regular education with resource room assistance for 20% of the day.
- P3 chose to place Tommy in a regular education class with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the school day.





*Figure 4* Placement recommendations for Tommy.

The majority of the principals made the same placement recommendation for Tommy. The number of years of previous teaching and administrative experience did not seem to impact those principals' recommended placement for Tommy. The principal who made the most restrictive placement recommendation was the administrator with the second highest number of years of experience as a teacher and an administrator.

5. *Matthew is an intermediate student with a history of failure at school.*

*Formal testing was attempted but could not be completed due to Matthew's severe difficulties in attending and focusing as well as significant language limitations. During an observation by the school psychologist, Matthew responded to the observer when she said hello, then proceeded to wander the classroom. He did not play with any of the toys or show an interest in other children. He engaged in vocalizing ("wa-ha") and repetitively waved his hands in front of his face. Matthew's gaze was consistently averted during contact with others in the room. Matthew*

*was resistant to the teacher's attempts to engage him in tasks; tangible rewards such as raisins and pretzels were used to increase task compliance. The teacher constantly redirected Matthew to look at materials and often started tasks with hand over hand assistance. Matthew was able to build a four block tower, point to six colors, and match six animal cards. He was not able to copy a vertical line or circle, a skill usually developed by age 3.*

*\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in a regular education class in our building.*

*\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in regular education with resource room assistance for 20% of the day.*

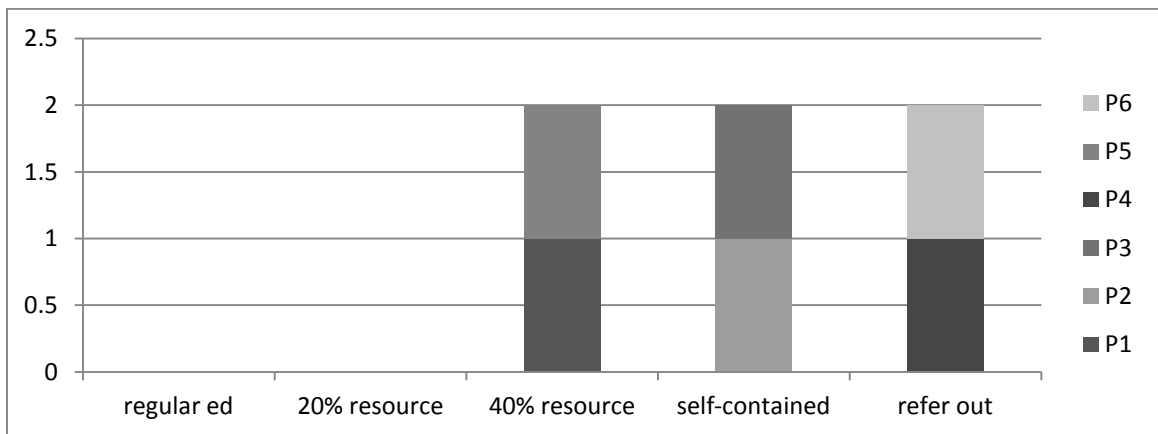
*\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in one of our regular education classes with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the school day.*

*\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in a self-contained special education classroom in our building.*

*\_\_\_\_\_ I would not be comfortable recommending programming for this child in our building and think that the Director of Special Education should refer this case to our Intermediate Unit or an outside agency.*

- P1 and P5 chose to place Matthew in a regular education classroom with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the school day.

- P2 chose to place Matthew in a self-contained special education classroom in his building for all core subjects. Matthew would be included in regular specials classes.
- P3 chose to place Matthew in a self-contained special education classroom in his building.
- P4 and P6 stated that he would not be comfortable recommending programming for this child in his building and thought that the Director of Special Education should refer this case to the Intermediate Unit or an outside agency.



*Figure 5* Placement recommendations for Matthew.

Once again, the principals with the least amount of experience made less restrictive placement recommendations for Matthew. The principals with more years of experience in education made the most restrictive placement recommendations for Matthew.

## **Summary of Placement Recommendations from Scenario Situations**

When making overall placement recommendations, the principals selected regular education with resource room assistance for 20% of the day more than any other placement choice. The least selected recommendation choice was not being comfortable recommending programming for the child in their building and referring the case to district's Intermediate Unit or an outside agency. The participants who demonstrated through their responses to the various interview questions that they had fewer concerns with regard to the placement of students with autism in regular education classrooms tended to make more inclusive decisions. Those principals who were more apprehensive about the success of inclusionary practices tended to give more restrictive placement recommendations. None of the principals made mention of the legal requirement for placing a student in the least restrictive environment to gauge that student's success before moving that student to a more restrictive environment. Of all the elementary principals, P1 made the least restrictive placement recommendations. In his interview session, P1 recalled having memorable experiences with a close friend's sibling who he had described as being mentally retarded and as having characteristics of autism. The boys were inseparable, and inevitably the sibling was ever present. It is understandable that these positive experiences with a person with characteristics of autism had a positive impact on P1's attitude toward individuals with disabilities.

## **Summary**

This chapter presented a review of the data collection and analysis process. The data was collected from interviews with participants from six different school districts in western Pennsylvania. Data was analyzed, coded, and classified. Points of alignment emerged relative to participants stating that they made placement recommendations based on a case by case basis, that inclusion not only benefitted the students with autism but also their general education peers, and that limited knowledge and experiences with inclusion and autism were barriers for many administrators in their placement recommendations.

The next chapter relates the data analysis to the research questions of this study. The research findings are summarized. Recommendations for action and suggestions for further study are provided.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Introduction**

More than 25,000 children in the United States will be diagnosed with autism this year. In addition, statistics indicate that the incidence of autism is increasing. Due to the increase in the number of children diagnosed with autism entering our schools, principals need to provide an environment that will offer appropriate instruction for these students. Will that instruction be provided in an inclusive general education classroom? Federal law and PDE policy require that each LEA and IEP team make appropriate educational placement decisions for students. Therefore, children who have been diagnosed with autism should not be excluded from regular education classrooms merely because of their label. The attitude of the principal would seemingly have an effect on the faculty and staff of an elementary school. A principal's personal experiences and training both as a teacher and as an administrator shape his/her perception regarding inclusion.

#### **Summary of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to identify the attitudes of elementary principals regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular education classes and the relationship between those attitudes and the placement recommendations of students diagnosed with autism. The majority of the research questions relate to the elementary principals' concerns about the inclusion of students with autism and their experiences, be it personal experience

or professional development, and how those concerns and experiences influenced their attitudes toward inclusion.

### **Addressing Research Question 1**

*What are the concerns of elementary principals regarding the inclusion of students with autism in the general curriculum?*

This question explored the elementary principals' concerns when students with autism are included in general education classrooms. The participants made statements which revealed that they were familiar with the legislation that affords students with disabilities the civil right to be included in regular education classes. Inclusion for students with autism receives continued support because it has been found to result in gains in social development (Schreibman, 2005). The majority of the participants made statements which described their concerns regarding classroom management. The principals believed that students with autism tend to have behavioral issues that can disrupt the educational process for the other students in the classroom. Students diagnosed with autism often present challenging behaviors that can impede their success in inclusive classrooms. For example, they may demonstrate perseverative and self-stimulatory behaviors, impairments in social interactions and relationships, and impaired communications and language skills. Therefore, they often display a limited range of interests, lack peer relationships, and resist participation in games and activities, all of which are contrary to common characteristics for same-grade peers in general education settings (Goodman & Williams, 2007).

These behavioral deficits can jeopardize student learning for all of the students, not just the students diagnosed with autism.

Due to the atypical characteristics of the students diagnosed with autism, general education teachers, as well as special education teachers, who are instructing these students in an inclusive classroom, must be well equipped with the most effective instructional strategies to address the needs of these students. If the teachers are not prepared, the deficit behaviors are likely to interfere with the successful inclusion of students with autism in the general education classroom. An Individualized Education Program (IEP) that is comprehensive, unique for each child, and has measurable goals and objectives must be developed and applied for all children requiring special education services. This process is well known to school professionals who are accustomed to developing and applying IEPs.

The participants in the study supported the success of their faculty with the implementation of IEPs for students with autism. The principals stated with confidence that their teachers had plenty of experience in teaching students with disabilities and would put into practice any modifications or accommodations that were specified in the IEPs for their students.

Benefits of inclusion for students with disabilities have been well documented (e.g., SRI International, 1993). However, many critics caution that educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms might disrupt academic achievement of students without disabilities (Leadley, 2004). Gahdhi (2007) found with very few exceptions, being educated in an inclusive classroom



does not negatively impact the reading achievement of non-disabled students. In fact, she claimed that certain practices common in inclusive classrooms appear to contribute to non-disabled students who are in inclusive classrooms outperforming non-disabled peers who are in non-inclusive classrooms. For example, the use of paraprofessionals in inclusive classrooms, as well as frequent meetings between the classroom teacher and a special education teacher, appear to be especially beneficial for students without disabilities in those general education classrooms. In addition, support for inclusion is based on reports of positive academic outcomes for the students with disabilities. Goodman and Williams (2007) stated that evidence has suggested that inclusion increases academic gains, particularly for those who demonstrate greater intellectual abilities.

The majority of the study participants agreed that the achievement level of all of the students could increase if students with disabilities, specifically with autism, were placed in regular education classes. The administrators made comments that described situations where specific students with an autism diagnosis had strengths in either reading or math. With these strengths, these students were able to assist their regular education peers.

The participants were asked to consider students with disabilities, other than autism, who might also be able to be successfully included in regular education classrooms. A variety of disabilities were listed, such as vision impairments, emotional disturbance, hearing impairments, and other minor impairments. They all agreed that students with these differing types of

disabilities could be successful in regular education classrooms if they were provided with the appropriate supports and accommodations.

The participants were asked to discuss their personal experiences with students diagnosed with autism. The range in years of experience (both teaching and administration together) for these elementary principals was from sixteen years to fifty-three years. Most stated that while they were teaching, they did not recall having students diagnosed with autism in their classes. This diagnosis was not utilized, for the most part, for students in the 1980s and 1990s. Therefore, they did not recall having teaching experiences with students with an autism label. In the past few years, the participants have had increasing experiences with students with autism in their buildings. Most of those experiences were considered to be positive in nature. Two of the participants had personal experiences with children who had characteristics of autism. Both participants made positive comments about those personal experiences.

In considering the information collected through the interview process concerning this research question, the data revealed that the elementary principals' main concern connected to the inclusion of students with autism in the general curriculum were the impact of possible disruptive behaviors on the educational process. They went on to explain that these disruptive behaviors could be overcome with appropriate supports and accommodations. In addition, the principals stated that their teachers did an excellent job of following students' IEPs. On the contrary, no mention was made of the same teachers' ability to implement positive behavior support plans.

## **Addressing Research Question 2**

*What are the concerns of elementary principals regarding all students meeting the academic standards?*

This question examined the participants' concerns on the topic of all of the students meeting the academic standards of the curriculum. The participants stated that the regular education students would meet the academic standards, as long as the students with disabilities who were included in the class were not exhibiting behaviors that were disruptive to the educational process. If inclusive classrooms are to be effective; administrators and teachers must accept inclusion as necessary and beneficial (Berry, 2010). Two of the participants made statements in regard to the idea that students with autism can, at times, raise the educational level of the class. Schreibman (2005) has stated that evidence has suggested that inclusion increases academic gains, particularly for those students with autism who demonstrate greater intellectual abilities. Several of the participants stated that if a student's ability level was too low, then that student would not be successful in meeting the academic standards. They recommended that a pull-out program, where the students are taught at their level in a special education classroom, would be a more appropriate placement for these students.

The participants reiterated that behavioral disruptions from students who are included in a regular education classroom may cause students to fail to meet the academic standards of the curriculum. These behavioral disruptions were thought to be harmful to the educational process. The principals made

statements that if a teacher did not have the appropriate supports, then that teacher may struggle with classroom management. Poor classroom management can undoubtedly lead to some students not being able to successfully meet the academic standards in an inclusive classroom.

### **Addressing Research Question 3**

*How do prior personal and professional experiences and professional development influence elementary principals' concerns?*

The participants' personal and professional experiences and their professional development were considered in order to understand how these areas influenced their placement recommendations. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2001), more than half of all special education students spend most of their days learning alongside general education students, and approximately 96% of general education teachers have at some point taught students with disabilities in their classrooms. Therefore, administrators and teachers must have the appropriate training in order to deliver instruction in a way that best meets the needs of all of the students. Principals must facilitate inclusion as well as support teachers' implementation of any accommodations that are identified for student success. According to Martinez (2006), the principal determines the climate and degree to which this process is successful. Principals must provide staff members with adequate training, access to support personnel, and opportunities for professional development regarding best practices in teaching students with disabilities.

The participants claimed that they had little training in special education, both in their coursework to obtain their teaching and administrative certificates and in the various professional development conferences or trainings that they had attended since securing those certificates. None of the participants stated that they had provided any type of professional development opportunities for the general education teachers concerning inclusion. Interestingly, they identified that they had limited training in the area of special education, but did not seek training for their faculty in this field of study. This poses the notion that they may not be truly supportive of inclusion if they are not actively pursuing professional development for their faculty to ensure success with this practice.

The principal who made the most inclusive placement recommendations for the students in the scenario situations discussed having a favorable relationship with a child who displayed characteristics of autism as a boy. This experience must have made a positive impact on his viewpoint toward children with autism. The principals who made more restrictive placement recommendations for the students in the scenario situations shared that they did not have any personal experience with people with autism.

#### **Addressing Research Question 4**

*What is the relationship between elementary principals' formal education and professional development experiences with students with autism and their attitude toward the inclusion of students with autism?*

Formal education and professional development opportunities should enhance a principal's ability to provide leadership and guidance to faculty when

recommending inclusion for students with autism. Praisner's study showed that for the principals who responded to her survey, preparation programs provided them with only a small part of the knowledge base deemed by experts in special education as important to the implementation of inclusion (2003). In addition, she found that the general special education information such as characteristics of disabilities, special education law, and behavior management may have been adequately covered in the preparation programs, but specific topics that addressed actual strategies and processes that support inclusion seemed to be lacking.

The participants overwhelmingly expressed that they had little formal education and professional development experience with autism. Most replied that they had participated in various trainings or workshops that were offered for Act 48 or Act 45 hours. Act 48 of 1999 requires individuals holding a Pennsylvania professional educator certificate to complete continuing education requirements every five years in order to maintain their certificates as active. Act 45 of 2007 is similar in that it requires administrators to complete continuing education requirements, too. All of the principals claimed that they had little coursework in the area of special education and autism in their college coursework for both their teaching certificate and their administrative certificate. Due to this limited training in special education, especially with autism, the principals seemed to make more restrictive placement recommendations. The participants made comments about providing accommodations for the various students, but suggested utilizing those accommodations in the special education

classroom and not the regular education classroom. For example, P5 recommended that Peter be placed in the special education resource room for 40 percent of the day. She added that he was used to having one-on-one supervision at his previous school to keep him on task. She stated that he would be more successful with that one-on-one supervision in the resource room instead of using the same accommodation to assist Peter in the regular education classroom. If she had recent professional development in the area of autism, she may have felt more comfortable with recommending a more inclusive placement for Peter.

Another example was the placement recommendation for Joey from P6. This principal stated that he would recommend a self-contained special education classroom for Joey due to his short attention span. P6 believed that Joey may have Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD). If P6 had attended professional development workshops on autism, he most likely would have made a less restrictive placement recommendation along with some ideas for accommodating Joey's needs to help him stay on-task.

### **Addressing Research Question 5**

*What is the relationship between an elementary principal's attitude toward the inclusion of students with disabilities and the principal's recommendation for placement for a child with a profile that depicts a child with autism?*

When examining the relationship between an elementary principal's attitude toward the inclusion of students with disabilities and the principal's recommendation for placement for a child with a profile that depicts a child with

autism, the participants with fewer concerns regarding inclusion tended to make less restrictive placement recommendations. This is important to note because of the implications of a principal's ability to influence placement decisions, even though those decisions must be made by an IEP team. A principal with a positive attitude toward inclusion would most likely positively influence an IEP team. Praisner found that principals with more positive attitudes toward inclusion were more likely to believe that less restrictive placements were most appropriate for students with disabilities (2003). An elementary principal who is supportive of the practice of including students with autism in regular education classrooms appears to be a significant factor in creating effective inclusive settings.

P1 was the most supportive of including students with autism in the regular education classrooms. In his teaching career, he had copious experience with special education students. Due to that experience, he was more willing to accept that students with disabilities, even students with autism, could be successful if they were included in the regular education setting. When he gave his placement recommendations, P1 was quick to mention various accommodations that could be made to help the student be more successful in the included class. He mentioned Title I support, speech support, occupational therapy, therapeutic staff support (TSS) service, and physical therapy as examples of ancillary supports that could be provided to the different students that were described in the scenario situations.

P3 was less supportive of including the students with autism in the regular education classes. Although he expressed that he had prior experience with



students with autism earlier in his teaching career, his placement recommendations were still restrictive. Instead of choosing options that depicted the least restrictive choice, he selected more limited alternatives. When discussing the information from his demographics survey, he described his school as being one where special education services were provided outside of the regular education classroom. Therefore, it was not surprising that he made placement recommendations that were outside of the regular education class, too.

P6 had similar attitudes concerning the least restrictive environment placements as P3. When discussing the information that he had provided on the demographics survey, it was clear that P6's school was less inclusive. He made statements that illustrated his lack of support for inclusive classrooms. When asked if he thought the education level of the general education students would decrease if students with disabilities (including autism) were placed in the general education classroom he stated, "Yes. There's only so much time that a teacher can give. It eventually takes time away from the other students." He then stated that it can be "too much of a hassle" to have special education students receive their education in regular education classrooms.

#### **Addressing Research Question 6**

*What is the relationship between an elementary principal's personal characteristics and the principal's attitudes toward inclusion of children with autism?*

When exploring the relationship between an elementary principal's personal characteristics and the principal's attitudes toward the inclusion of children with autism in regular education classes, it became apparent that the participants who have been practicing longer, and who attended their preparation programs the longest ago, tended to make more restrictive placement recommendations. This may be due to the limited exposure to special education concepts through special education credits during their preparation coursework. In Praisner's study (2003), she found that the more topics that principals had as part of their formal training such as courses, workshops, and/or significant portions of courses (10% of content or more), the more positive their attitudes were toward inclusion. The participants who had personal experience working with students in Title I programs and with Instructional Support programs made less restrictive placement recommendations. These experiences seemed to have given them exposure to a wider range of students with differing needs. The elementary principals who had been in their districts the longest made more restrictive placement recommendations. Gender did not seem to impact a principal's placement recommendations.

P1 was the most supportive of inclusion. His background revealed both a personal experience as a child with a student with characteristics of autism and extensive experience with special education students as a teacher.

P4 was supportive of inclusion for students with autism. She has experience in that one of her schools hosts the Competent Learner Model (CLM) class for the Intermediate Unit. Therefore, she is very familiar with autism and its

quirks. She mentioned that some of the CLM students were mainstreamed into the specials classes and lunch when appropriate to do so.

P2 was supportive of inclusion too. While teaching, he had assignments where he co-taught with a special education teacher. Thus, he had valuable experience with the inclusion of students with IEPs in the regular education classroom.

### **Recommendations for Future Action**

Due to the increase in the number of children diagnosed with autism entering our schools, it has become even more imperative that principals provide an environment that will offer appropriate instruction for these students. Therefore, a principal must have a thorough understanding of the behavioral characteristics of autism. In addition, principals must have a comprehensive knowledge base concerning the best practices for instructing students with autism, both in and out of the regular education classroom setting.

As Horrocks noted in her study (2008), formal training in special education is not a requirement in many principal certification programs. Training, designed specifically in understanding the characteristics of autism and social skill development, needs further investigation to determine if these two aspects of training could make a greater impact than general training in special education. School districts must consider professional development opportunities not only for the teachers who will be working directly with the students diagnosed with autism, but also for the administrators so that they have a much better appreciation of these unique students.

Based on the findings of this qualitative study, it is apparent that elementary principals are comfortable with the inclusion of students with autism in regular education for portions of the school day. It is undoubtedly important for principals to have a positive attitude concerning inclusion in order for students with autism to be included in regular education classes successfully. In order to improve their comfort level, so that they will make placement recommendations that are less restrictive for students with autism, principals should seek professional development and training in the area of autism. And, school districts should be cognizant of administrators' attitudes toward inclusion when evaluating current principals and when interviewing potential candidates for principal vacancies to ensure that students with autism are being educated in the most appropriate setting for their individual needs. By way of more training and more positive experiences with the elusive characteristics that are associated with autism, elementary principals will absolutely make placement recommendations that not only follow the law, but also that are in the best interest of the students who have been graced with this intriguing identification.

### **Recommendations for Future Researchers**

Based on the results of this study, this researcher offers the following considerations for future research:

- The following areas related to principals' attitudes toward inclusion call for additional research: 1) the factors related to principals' placement perceptions; 2) the role of previous experience with students with disabilities and autism; 3) the principals' experience with functional behavior

assessments and positive behavior support plans, and 4) the specific types of training in inclusive practices.

- It is suggested that future researchers not limit their interview pool to just elementary principals in one intermediate unit. A similar regional culture may have limited this study.
- A mixed-method study, both quantitative and qualitative, should be conducted to gain a richer pool of data.

### **Conclusions**

In summary, elementary principals' attitudes toward the inclusion of students with autism in regular education classrooms are multifaceted. The qualitative, case study approach was used to collect data for this study. Six elementary principals with at least three years of administrative service were interviewed using a semi-structured interview process. The data revealed several key points of alignment that demonstrated administrators' beliefs and attitudes about the inclusion of students with autism in regular education classes. Three major points of alignment emerged relative to participants stating that they made placement recommendations based on a case by case basis, that inclusion not only benefitted the students with autism but also their general education peers, and that limited knowledge and experiences with inclusion and autism are barriers for many administrators in their placement recommendations.

In the interviews, the principals stated repeatedly that students with autism have such varied needs, that they would need to make determinations for placement based on a case by case basis. Being familiar with the varying

behavioral characteristics associated with autism is imperative for elementary principals when making placement decisions for their students. Another key point of alignment that emerged was that inclusion not only benefitted the students with autism but also their general education peers. The principals claimed that the students diagnosed with autism gained social skills whether they were included fully in the regular education setting or if they had more restrictive placements, such as only in the specials classes, including art, music, physical education, and library. The general education students had positive experiences with the students diagnosed with autism. The principals reported that the general education peers learned empathy; a valuable skill to help them in real world situations in the future. The participants also shared that they had repeatedly encountered students with autism who had exceptionally high math and reading skills and could therefore be class leaders in academic settings. A third point of alignment that emerged was the principals' limited knowledge and experiences with inclusion and autism. The principals recounted that they had little to no interaction with students with autism when they were teaching.

Since becoming administrators, these participants acknowledged that they had positive experiences with students diagnosed with autism. Although they did not have an abundance of experience with these students, the encounters that the administrators mentioned were overwhelmingly positive. When analyzing the placement recommendations of the participants, it became apparent that the more positive the experiences that the principals had with students with autism, the more likely the principals were to choose less restrictive settings for those

students. In addition, if inclusion is to be a feasible alternative to more segregated placements, its success will depend heavily upon the readiness and willingness of general education administrators to make decisions that will provide appropriate opportunities for students with special needs to remain in general education (Ayres & Meyer, 1992).

Bandura's social learning theory was utilized as the theoretical framework for this study. According to Bandura, people learn new behavior through observational learning of the social factors in their environment. If people observe positive, desired outcomes in the observed behavior, then they are more likely to model, imitate, and adopt the behavior themselves. Therefore, if a principal supports inclusion for students with autism, then it would seem that the faculty of that school would do so, too. In addition, students with autism would learn behaviors that would help them be more successful in inclusive settings .

Statistics show that 1 out of every 110 children is born with autism each year. In addition, government statistics suggest the prevalence rate of autism is increasing 10 to 17 percent annually. There has been no established explanation for this increase. "Inclusion is built on the premise that all students should be valued for their unique abilities and included as essential members of a school community" (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009, p. 44). Multiple participants who took part in this study commented on the fact that special education is not a place, but a service. That is the case for inclusion too – it is an important shift in the way that educators should think about students. In order to create more

inclusive schools, administrators must be a critical factor for success. The principal of an elementary school must articulate a vision and a commitment to the philosophy and practice of inclusive education for all (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009) – even those students with an autism diagnosis. Only then can these extraordinary students have opportunities to maximize their learning and move toward reaching their full potential. For a school to become a success with inclusion, principals must see all students as permanent members of a general education classroom. Identifying attitudes toward inclusion of students with autism is the first step in moving toward more inclusive elementary schools.



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## APPENDIX A

### Permission to use Dr. Judy Horrocks Scenario Situations

About Us | Tell Friends | How to Ask | How to Volunteer | FAQ | Tech Support | Top Experts | Expert Login

# AllExperts

Browse Answers: By Category Alphabetically

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Powerful Credit Score Analysis from the Leaders in Credit Repair



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## Autism/Answered Question

**Expert:** Dr. Judy Horrocks

**Subject:** request for permission

**Question:** Hello Dr. Horrocks,

I contacted you a couple of years ago asking permission to use your questionnaire for my dissertation study. Since that time, I have changed from conducting a quantitative study to a qualitative study. At this point, I'd like your permission to use the five scenario situations. I think they are great guides in discussing placement recommendations. I couldn't find another way to contact you regarding my request.

Thanks for your consideration,  
Lynda Weller

**Answer:** Yes, you certainly have my permission to use the scenarios in your study. I am honored that you will be using some of my research in your dissertation. I wish you the best of luck in your efforts!  
Dr Judy Horrocks

AllExperts is a FREE service, but if we've helped, you can pay it forward ... by rating this answer! This way, you help future questioners by guiding them to the best volunteers on this site. BTW, once you rate this answer, you can send it to yourself in an email.

[Thank/Rate the Expert](#) [Ask A Follow-Up Question](#)

## APPENDIX B

### Letter of Informed Consent

Month, Day, 2011

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I hope that this finds you well and enjoying a successful school year. My name is Lynda Weller, and I am a doctoral student in the Administration and Leadership Studies program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I am conducting a research study that examines the attitudes of elementary principals regarding inclusion of children with disabilities and the relationship between those attitudes and the placement recommendations of students diagnosed with autism. The sample from which I seek to obtain data has the criteria of being an elementary principal employed by a school district in western Pennsylvania, and has a minimum of three years of administrative experience.

You are invited to participate in the study. In order to help you make an informed decision as whether to participate, additional details and information regarding the research methods used in this study are below:

This study will use an interview method that solicits responses from currently practicing elementary principals utilizing the attached interview questions. Specifically, I would seek to interview you for approximately 45 to 60 minutes at a mutually agreed-upon location that is convenient for you. After conducting the interviews, a follow-up meeting will be arranged. This meeting will be used to seek your level of comfort in the interview, ask if there were additional questions you wished you had been asked or if any questions should be eliminated. Your feedback will be used to help refine the interview protocol for further studies that may be conducted on this topic. Your responses in this study will remain confidential. If you are willing to participate in the study, you will sign a consent form indicating your agreement to participate prior to their involvement in the study. You will be free to refuse to answer any question, as well as withdraw from the study at any time by contacting me through personal conversation, written communication, phone call, or email.

Please complete and return the enclosed copy of the informed consent form in the addressed envelope. If you choose not to participate, please return the form with only your name provided and the word "NO" printed on the form.

If you have any questions regarding this study you may contact me by phone or email at the information provided below:

Cell Phone: (814) 516-5542

Work Phone: (814) 677-3029

Email: lweller@mail.ocasd.org

Your time and cooperation is very much appreciated. Thank you considering my invitation to participate in the study.

Sincerely,

Lynda Weller

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This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724/357-77

## APPENDIX C

### Demographic Survey

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your area(s) of certification (include teacher and administrator)?
3. How many years did you teach?
4. For how long have you been an administrator?
5. How many years of experience do you have in your current position  
(including this year)?
6. How many years have you worked in your current district (including this  
year) as an administrator?
7. Do you have formal training in special education? Describe.
8. How many students attend your school?
9. How many students diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder attend your  
school?

## APPENDIX D

### Questions and Scenario Situations for Semi-Structured Interviews

#### Section One -- Interview Questions

1. Do you have personal experience with a special education student (i.e., a relative or close friend)? Describe.
2. What are your thoughts regarding the notion that students with disabilities have a basic right to receive their education in regular education classrooms?
3. Do you think that the achievement level of general education students will decrease if students with disabilities are placed in general education classrooms? Explain.
4. Do you think that the achievement level of general education students will decrease if students with autism are placed in general education classrooms? Explain.
5. Do you think that the achievement levels of students with disabilities would increase if they were placed in the general classroom? Explain.
6. Do you think that the achievement levels of students with autism would increase if they were placed in the general classroom? Explain.
7. Do you think that students with disabilities would increase social skills by interacting with general education students? Explain.
8. Do you think that students with autism would increase social skills by interacting with general education students? Explain.

9. Do you think that behavior management problems of students would increase and academic standards would be jeopardized if students with disabilities were placed in regular education classes? Explain.
10. Do you think that behavior management problems of students would increase and academic standards would be jeopardized if students with autism were placed in regular education classes? Explain.
11. What are your thoughts regarding regular education teachers and their comfort level regarding the implementation of individual educational plans if students with disabilities are placed in general education classrooms?
12. Do you believe that it is possible for students with disabilities to have their individual goals met in regular education classrooms? Explain.
13. Do you believe that it is possible for students with autism to have their individual goals met in regular education classrooms? Explain.
14. Do you believe that there are some special educational services that need to be delivered in a separate classroom to meet all goals in the individual education plans for students with disabilities? If so, what are those services?
15. Do you think that it is possible for the achievement level of all students to increase if children with disabilities are placed in general education classrooms?
16. Do you think that it is possible for the achievement level of all students to increase if children with autism are placed in general education classrooms?

17. What are your thoughts regarding the notion that regular education teachers prefer sending their students with disabilities to special education pull out programs rather than have special education teachers deliver services in the regular education classrooms?
18. Do you think that there are certain disabilities that could be included in regular education classes if accommodations are made and adequate support is given to the teachers? List those disabilities.
19. How would you describe your experience with the inclusion of special education students in regular education classes?
20. How would you describe your experience with the inclusion of special education students diagnosed with autism in regular education classes?

Scenario Situations:

Each participant will read the following descriptions and select the answer that best fits his/her recommendation for placement if this child was a resident within the school community. The student profiles do not contain complete information on each student. Please make a selection given only this information and information you have regarding your own school building(s) and make a selection based on your impression. After the participant has made his/her recommendations, discussion of each recommendation will follow.

1. Joey is a primary student whose profile of cognitive development is uneven; his IQ was tested at 110. He demonstrates reading recognition ability at above grade level but has delays in reading comprehension. He has a short attention



span and can demonstrate some hyperactivity particularly in large groups. Joey has few friends; he has trouble relating to peers. He is easily distracted when he is given verbal directions. Teachers report that he has little interest in or reaction to praise.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in a regular education class in our building.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in regular education with resource room assistance for 20% of the day.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in one of our regular education classes with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the school day.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in a self-contained special education classroom in our building.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would not be comfortable recommending programming for this child in our building and think that the Director of Special Education should refer this case to our Intermediate Unit or an outside agency.

2. Julie is a primary student with communication difficulties. She does not initiate communication; however, she can use complete sentences when addressed directly. She does not have a hearing loss but may seem to ignore the teachers' and students' attempts to speak with her and at times may seem overly sensitive to loud noises. Julie's parents report that she prefers to play alone and never interacts with the neighborhood children even though they have

attempted to take her to play groups. Teachers also report that she wants to perform certain activities in an exact order and resists change. She can read and has some writing ability but is well below grade level.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in a regular education class in our building.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in regular education with resource room assistance for 20% of the day.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in one of our regular education classes with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the school day.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in a self-contained special education classroom in our building.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would not be comfortable recommending programming for this child in our building and think that the Director of Special Education should refer this case to our Intermediate Unit or an outside agency.

3. Peter is an intermediate student. He loves to read books and responds well to a structured environment. Peter demonstrates a particular interest in logos or the labels on clothing. He may notice a person's clothing with little interest in the person wearing the clothes. He may wander off during instructional down time unless he is very well supervised. He does not show any interest in peers at home or at school. In the previous school, he was given one to one supervision to keep him on task. Peter eats a restricted diet. Sensory integration techniques

have shown some success to keep him calm and ready for instruction. Peter is stressed and uncomfortable for much of the time in the classroom setting. He has difficulty following directions and resists instruction. Peter may repeat words or phrases that appear to have special meaning to him.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in a regular education class in our building.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in regular education with resource room assistance for 20% of the day.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in one of our regular education classes with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the school day.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in a self-contained special education classroom in our building.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would not be comfortable recommending programming for this child in our building and think that the Director of Special Education should refer this case to our Intermediate Unit or an outside agency.

4. Tommy is an intermediate student and an above average reader and has an extensive vocabulary. He is very talkative but tries to direct all conversation to his interest of trains. He is very knowledgeable in the history and construction of trains and train tracks. He is very interested in his peers but often seems too domineering in his social interactions and so his peers tend to avoid him. He tends to get into other people's physical space and does not notice when others

are upset or hurt. Tommy's math skills are also above average for calculations; however, he has difficulty with word problems. Tommy has some difficulty following teacher directions unless they are written on the board and are very simple. He is easily distracted and therefore has trouble completing activities on time.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in a regular education class in our building.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in regular education with resource room assistance for 20% of the day.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in one of our regular education classes with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the school day.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in a self-contained special education classroom in our building.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would not be comfortable recommending programming for this child in our building and think that the Director of Special Education should refer this case to our Intermediate Unit or an outside agency.

5. Matthew is an intermediate student with a history of failure at school. Formal testing was attempted but could not be completed due to Matthew's severe difficulties in attending and focusing as well as significant language limitations. During an observation by the school psychologist, Matthew responded to the observer when she said hello, then proceeded to wander the classroom. He did

not play with any of the toys or show an interest in other children. He engaged in vocalizing (“wa-ha”) and repetitively waved his hands in front of his face. Matthew’s gaze was consistently averted during contact with others in the room. Matthew was resistant to the teacher’s attempts to engage him in tasks; tangible rewards such as raisins and pretzels were used to increase task compliance. The teacher constantly redirected Matthew to look at materials and often started tasks with hand over hand assistance. Matthew was able to build a four block tower, point to six colors, and match six animal cards. He was not able to copy a vertical line or circle, a skill usually developed by age 3.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in a regular education class in our building.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in regular education with resource room assistance for 20% of the day.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in one of our regular education classes with assistance of a special education teacher for 40% of the school day.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend placement in a self-contained special education classroom in our building.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would not be comfortable recommending programming for this child in our building and think that the Director of Special Education should refer this case to our Intermediate Unit or an outside agency.