

## **How Does Shared Decision Making Impact Inclusion**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Shared decision-making is a style of leadership that affords ownership, empowerment, and being part of a team that can make a difference. When the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) required a committee to develop an Individualized Education Program, inclusion was considered in order to provide the least restrictive environment within which the student could make progress in a school setting.**

**When the regular classroom teachers feel that they help to make decisions for inclusion of children in their classrooms, does it impact their implementation of inclusion? Regular classroom teachers were interviewed for this case study to determine how shared decision-making involves them and resolves barriers of inclusion for special needs students when teachers are involved in the process.**

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## Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to determine how shared decision-making is working to help the implementation of inclusion for special needs students in one school. The review of literature indicates that successful inclusion is attributed to a team approach. It therefore becomes relevant to determine whether and how regular educators are actually included in the decision-making process when it comes to inclusion of special needs students in their classrooms.

Shared decision-making is a style of leadership that affords ownership, provides empowerment, and allows individuals to be part of a team that can make a difference. When the regular classroom teachers feel that they help to make decisions for inclusion of children in their classrooms, does it impact their implementation of inclusion? Regular classroom teachers in this rural elementary school were interviewed for this case study to determine how shared decision-making involves them and resolves barriers to inclusion for special needs students when teachers are involved in the process. Knowing whether there are barriers to shared decision-making and how collaboration is working will help to determine if inclusion is being implemented in a way that benefits special needs students.

It then becomes important for the benefit of students to answer this question: How does shared decision-making impact the process of inclusion for special needs students? Attempting to find answers to this question leads to two others as subsets to the research question: (a) How can shared decision-making resolve barriers for inclusion? (b) How are regular educators included in the decision-making process when it comes to inclusion of special needs students in their classrooms?

## A Review of Literature

Arriving at a definition for inclusion that is acceptable for all concerned has presented both controversy and compromise. Crockett and Kauffman (1999) explain inclusion as a term that most often describes the placement of a student, regardless of the level of his or her disability, into an age-appropriate general education classroom in the local community school. A similar definition was proposed by Wang (1994) when she described inclusion as bringing children who are disabled out of their special classes and into the regular school environment and reducing special education referrals and labels by strengthening regular school programs. Villa and Thousand (2003) describe inclusion as the principle and practice of considering general education as the placement of first choice for all learners, which encourages educators to bring support and services for the students into the classroom.

While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) does not require inclusion to always be the result of an Individualized Education Program (IEP), it requires an IEP team to determine the least restrictive environment for the child (Setout,

2001). Providing individualized instruction means that each student must be looked at as an individual when determining services and modifications. The IEP provides the guidelines and a means of measuring success of services and academic growth for special education students in the regular classroom. While accommodations matter for students, learning is what counts. All students need to be able to demonstrate mastery, not just exposure. Finding the best way to make this happen in every setting is a challenge still facing educators. Despite efforts toward inclusion, various problems exist with implementing it, which include lack of training for teachers and lack of administrative support (Crockett & Kauffman, 1998).

Teachers who were interviewed in school districts in which successful integration into regular classrooms had been found (Janney, Snell, Beers, & Raynes, 1995) attributed the successful integration to a team approach and support offered by the principals in their schools. Fullan and Miles (1992) suggest that collaborative time for teachers to undertake and sustain school improvement may be more important than equipment or facilities or staff development. Inclusive education cannot be successful without collaboration since inclusion is predicated on professionals working together for the purpose of improving the education of all students in the school (Graden & Bauer, 1991). As viewed by Graden and Bauer, collaborative problem solving is central to the success of inclusive schools and provides the support by which interventions, adaptations, and accommodations are implemented in inclusive classrooms.

Sergiovanni (1994) believes that the rationale for shared decision-making is that those who are closest to students are best equipped to make educational decisions to improve instructional programs. It is recommended (Meadows & Saltzman, 2002) that for shared leadership to be successful, the principal must make sure that teachers have the appropriate skills and opportunities to practice them. Lontos (1994) believes that change is most likely to be effective and lasting when those who implement it feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for the process. It is relevant, then, to determine if and how shared decision-making is occurring and giving teachers a sense of ownership, and if it is resolving barriers to inclusion.

#### Method

The method for this case study was to gather the information through informal observations, analysis of IEPs, and directly through interviews with six general educators, who can best provide information concerning implementing inclusion within the regular education classroom. Obtaining the information through multiple sources provides and improves validity for case studies.

### **Participants and Setting**

The subjects for this study were six regular classroom teachers within an elementary school in a rural community located in north central West Virginia. The school contains 480 preschool through fourth-grade students. In recent years, consolidation of four smaller schools gathered the teachers and students together under

one roof and under the leadership of one principal, who was hired from outside of the district. The implementation of inclusion was varied within the four smaller schools, which led to various interpretations of how it should be implemented in this school.

Within the school there are 22 regular classroom teachers from preschool to fourth grade. One regular classroom teacher having the highest number of identified special education students in each grade was selected to be interviewed for each of the six grade levels. It was believed that the challenges of instructing special needs students could be better identified and expressed by teachers having several students with IEPs in their classes. The six participating grade-level teachers had the following number of identified special needs students within their classes during this case study: preschool (3), kindergarten (1), first (3), second (6), third (5), and fourth (6).

### **Procedures**

Each of the six regular education teachers were given a simple one-question questionnaire explaining briefly the reason for requesting their assistance. These teachers were asked to put their name on the paper and to circle yes or no to answer this question: Would you be willing to assist me with work on my dissertation concerning inclusion? If any of these six teachers preferred not to participate, then the teacher having the next highest number of special education students for that grade level would have been asked until six willing participants were procured.

After receiving their willingness to participate, a letter explaining the study further was given to the six teachers. After this point, the respondents were identified only by grade level. Interviews conducted with each willing participant obtained their opinions and knowledge about inclusion and shared decision-making, as well as the current modifications and accommodations they were making for the identified special education students in their class. A Summary Sheet from each student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), which lists the modifications developed for each identified special education student, was provided for the researcher by the special educator who served the students from these six classrooms. These are obtained by accessing the IEP Writer computer program, which is used to develop and print each student's IEP.

Examination of the Summary Sheet for each student determined what program modifications were suggested for the students in each of the classrooms. An IEP Document Analysis Protocol was developed to determine the various modifications that were to be implemented within each classroom. The number of times was documented that a specific modification was listed on the IEPs represented within that class. This provided the researcher with a composite list of the modifications that had been recommended for each of the special needs students who were included within each of the six classrooms and how often the same modification appeared in these IEPs from each class.

While interviewing the regular classroom teachers, a prepared protocol of questions was used. These focused interviews remained open-ended but followed the protocol. The interviews were conducted with the classroom teachers who had met the criteria and had expressed a willingness to participate. During the interviews, the participants responded to questions regarding inclusion and shared decision-making. Their exact responses were recorded electronically with written notes taken briefly during the interview. Transcribed interviews were analyzed using the Ethnograph v5.0 computer software program as well as completing a manual analysis of the teacher's opinions and perceptions. Through analysis determining segments of interest, barriers to inclusion were ascertained from the teachers' responses to questions, as well as whether the regular educators feel included in the decision-making process for implementing inclusion in their school.

The transcript from each interview was also reviewed to identify categories within the themes. The major themes were reviewed for similarities and common relationships. Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to examination and interpretation of data gathered for qualitative research as a microanalysis. "Qualitative analysis involves a radically different way of thinking about data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.59). It requires the researcher to learn to listen and let the data speak to them.

## **Results**

### **Informal Observations**

Informal observations within the classrooms indicated a nurturing and academic atmosphere, as well as attempts to try new experiences and ideas. The fourth-grade teacher was attempting a strategy that she expressed a desire to do, having the students work in small groups. Students orally responding as a group, while reviewing a phonemic awareness skill, was the method of instruction within the first-grade class as the students sat on the carpet surrounding the teacher. The preschoolers had just completed lunch and were resting with their heads on the tables to settle their stomachs before going out onto the new playground. The students in the second and third grades were discussing character traits in their classrooms. In the kindergarten class, the children were singing during their morning welcoming activities. Engaging activities in which all students were included were observed with evidence of all students participating within the classrooms. This was a relevant observation for my study.

### IEP Document Analysis

Within the six interviewed regular education classrooms, there were a total of fifty-four separate modifications listed on the students' IEPs. However, when asked questions about what modifications they were using in class and what they might be doing for special education students that will enhance instruction for all students, the teachers indicated thirty additional modifications that they were currently implementing that were not listed on their students' IEPs. Of the fifty-four separate modifications, only ten that were listed on their students' IEPs were reportedly being used by these six teachers in their classrooms (see Table 1). This indicates that only 18% of the modifications listed on the students' Individualized Education Program (IEP) were mentioned by the teachers when asked what modifications they use in class.

Table 1

*Accurately Reported IEP Modifications by Grade Level*

Grade Level	Number of IEP Modifications	Accurately reported Modifications
Preschool	8	
Kindergarten	4	
First	9	Reduced work
Second	12	Grade on oral work Small group-work Having charts in room
Third	8	Retest if failure Reduced work
Fourth	13	Read tests orally Reduced work Small groups Read assignments orally

## Interviews

The information reported by the teachers from the six individual grades yields Table 2 in which four common trends can be identified from the interviews of how shared decision-making impacts inclusion. It can be seen that the teachers' comments indicate that within these four areas of impacting inclusion there are many examples of shared decision-making being effectuated in this educational environment.

Table 2

### *How Shared Decision-Making Impacts Inclusion*

Trends	Examples
At SAT & IEP meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Look at samples of student's work</li> <li>Discuss what has and hasn't worked for the student</li> <li>Work as a team to make decisions</li> <li>Discuss academic and social progress</li> <li>Discuss student's needs with all the people involved</li> <li>Get input from other people</li> </ul>
Through Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scheduling the students</li> <li>Everybody has different opinions &amp; sees a child differently</li> <li>Modifications</li> <li>Strategies &amp; techniques</li> <li>Curriculum</li> <li>Talking &amp; sharing &amp; coming up with a good plan that is best for the student</li> <li>Regular ed. and special ed. sharing weekly lesson plans</li> <li>The best way for special students to learn</li> <li>Special educators sharing ideas with classroom teachers</li> </ul>
By Services for Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Placement for student's benefit</li> <li>Programs students should be in</li> <li>Trying to make transitions smoother</li> <li>Regular educators sharing with special educators what is needed for them to help students in regular classroom</li> <li>Getting the best possible situation going for the child</li> </ul>
Resolves Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Special educators going into regular classrooms to work to help students with regular educator</li> <li>Shared decision-making has an impact on how teachers feel about inclusion</li> <li>Work harder to achieve the goal by being a part of it</li> </ul>

Figure 1

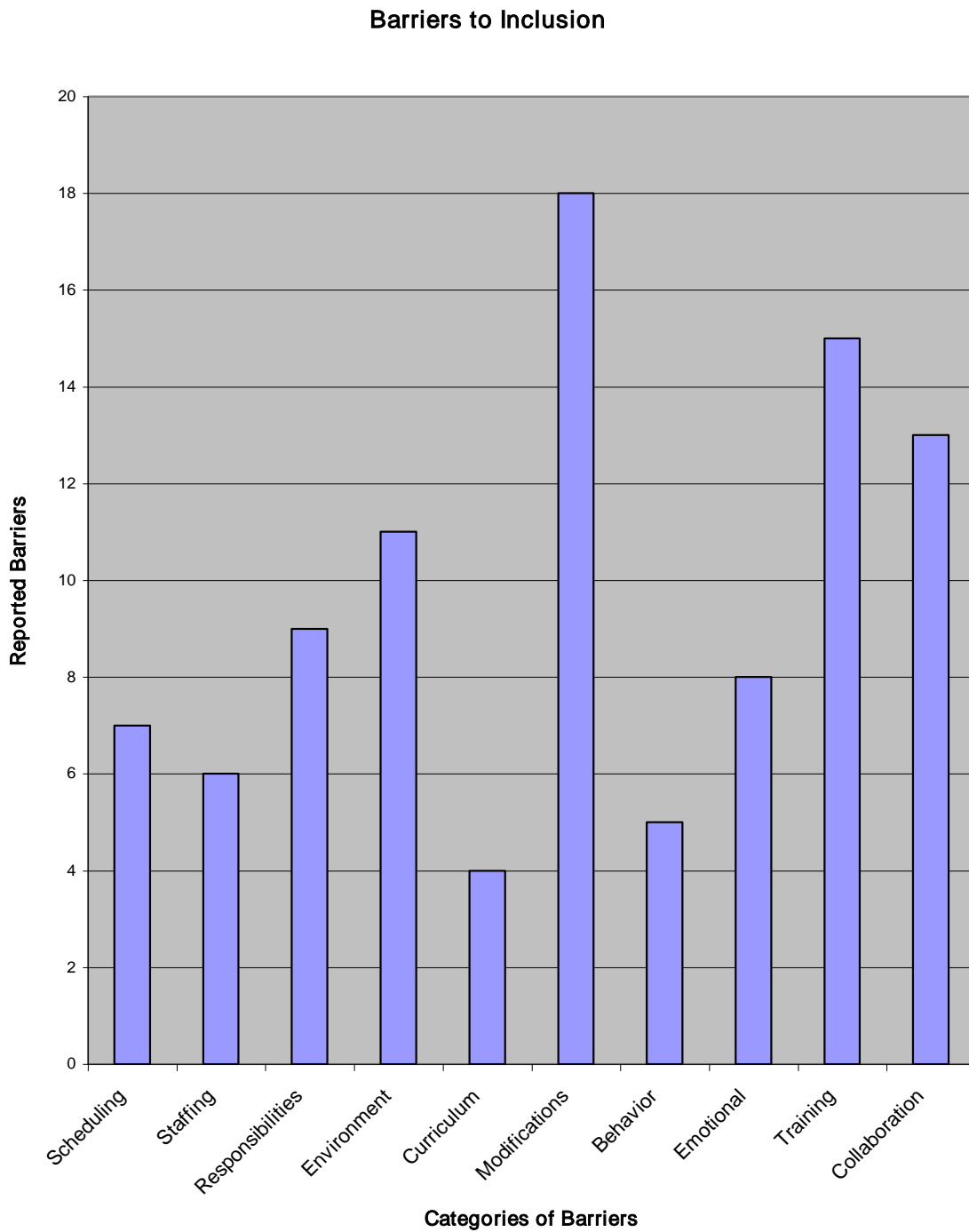


Figure 1. Separate barriers to inclusion reported by the teachers interviewed (left axis) and barriers divided into separate categories (right axis) yield the number of reported barriers to inclusion for each category.



While examples of shared decision-making were apparent, as reported by these teachers, they also expressed barriers to inclusion. Figure 1 discloses the barriers to inclusion by the number of reports within the interviews. As can be seen, modifications was the most frequently reported barrier to inclusion within these six classrooms with lack of training being the next highest reported barrier, followed by a need for more collaboration. Curriculum was indicated as the least concern regarding inclusion for students.

In the setting for this case study, the principal encouraging shared decision-making leads to teachers resolving barriers to inclusion on their own. Although barriers to inclusion exist within this school setting, there are definite examples of solving these issues that were corroborated by the teachers. For example, while teachers indicated that there are additional responsibilities for them to instruct special needs students within their classrooms, an example given was the issue being resolved by special education teachers going into the regular classrooms to assist with instruction. The issue of the same reading series being used by both regular and special educators was resolved by the teachers being involved with the selection process of a new reading series that would meet the needs of all students and that could be used within special education and regular classroom settings. Special educators and regular educators getting together at the beginning of the year assists in determining what will help special needs students. Table 3 demonstrates examples of how shared decision-making is helping to resolve these barriers within the ten categories, according to the participants' responses during the interviews.

The information from the interviews provided nine categories of ways that the teachers are included in making decisions affecting inclusion. A statement such as, "You work harder to achieve the goal because you were a part of it," is viewed as one way – by taking ownership – that regular educators are included in shared decision-making for inclusion. "Shared decision-making helps with including students and doing lessons and modifications" expresses another way that regular educators are included in the decisions for inclusion of special needs students. Breaking this type of information down into grade levels (see Figure 2) demonstrates further how teachers within this school make decisions that yield positive results toward implementing inclusion. Six of the nine ways were verbalized by all of the teachers interviewed.

Table 3

*Examples of How Shared Decision-Making is Resolving these Barriers for Inclusion*

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Barrier	Possible Solution to Barrier
Scheduling	Through decisions about scheduling and inclusion by special educators Placement in specific regular classroom
Staffing	Principal adding staff after discussion about preschool student
Responsibilities	Special ed. teachers going into regular classes to provide assistance
Environment	Special educator suggests strategies to use with children
Curriculum	Requested same reading series for both special and regular ed.
Modifications	Deciding on modifications as a team at SAT and IEP meetings
Behavior	Having somebody else right there to help focus the students' attention
Emotional	Everybody having a voice Working harder to achieve a goal when you are a part of it Feeling important and worthwhile Impacts teachers' feeling about inclusion
Training	Being given hand-outs by special educators Regular education and special education working together
Collaboration	At SAT and IEP meetings Through planning together at the beginning of the year Discussing strategies, techniques, modifications, schedules, curriculum Classroom teachers getting ideas from special educators for students

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Figure 2

How Regular Educators are Included in Shared Decision-Making for Inclusion  
by Grade Level

	P	K	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>
At SATs & IEPs	X	X	X	X	X	X
By planning for students (placement, scheduling, etc.)	X	X	X	X	X	X
By planning for curriculum & modifications		X		X	X	X
By determining what's best for students	X	X	X	X	X	X
Through collaboration	X	X	X	X	X	X
With positive feelings about inclusion	X	X	X	X	X	X
With positive feelings about shared decision-making	X	X	X	X	X	X
By taking ownership			X			X
By working as a team	X		X			

Figure 2. Nine different ways emerged of how regular education teachers share in decisions that assist in implementing inclusion within this school.

Figure 3

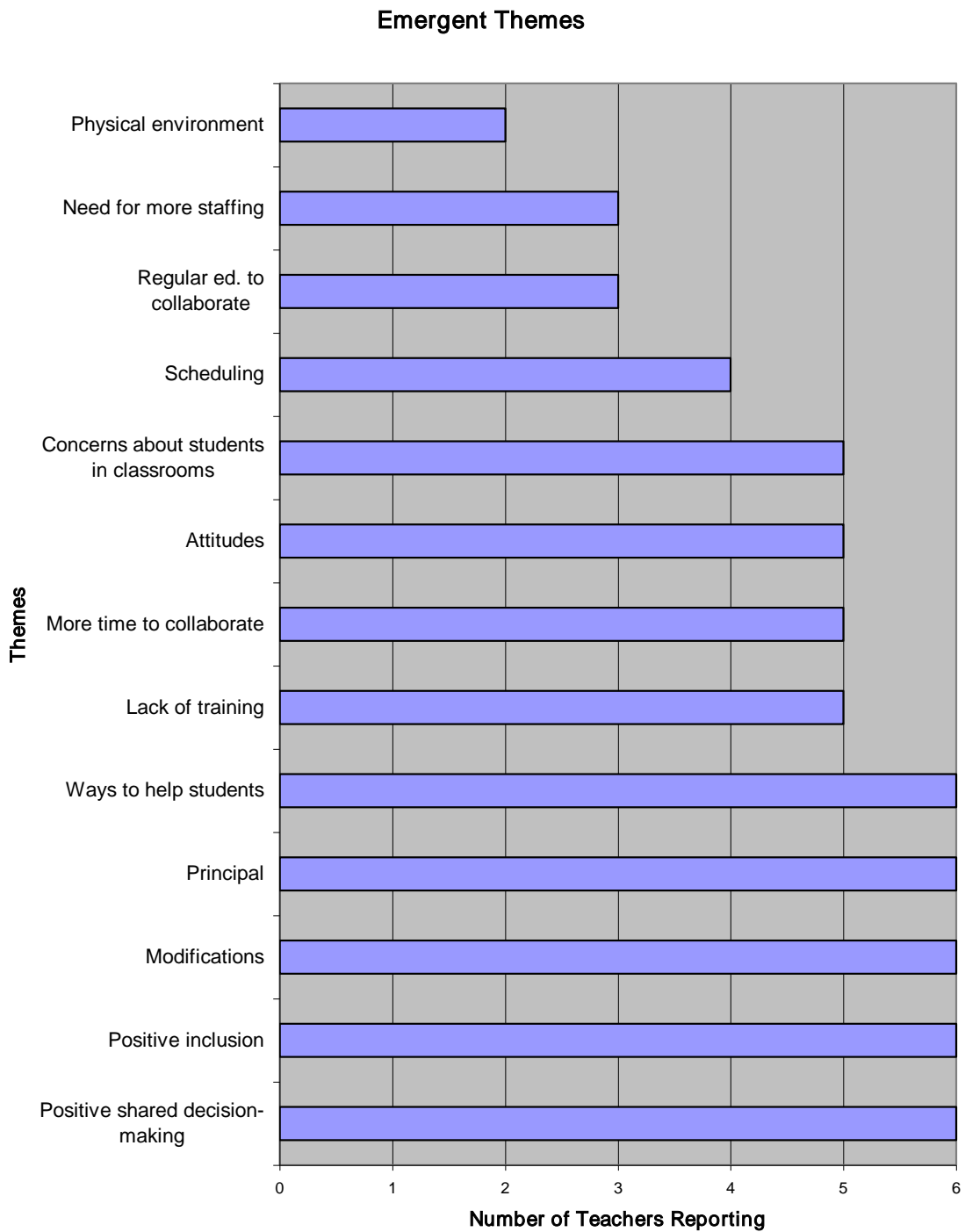


Figure 3. The themes (left axis) that emerged from the six teachers' comments are indicated. The frequency of the comments is demonstrated by the number of teachers (right axis) making statements that fall into each of these thirteen themes.

Figure 3 is a numerical representation demonstrating how many of the six interviewed teachers made comments falling into the emergent themes categories. An awareness by the teachers is exhibited within this figure of seeking out more knowledge that will benefit the students during the implementation of inclusion. Although the teachers reported some concerns over attitudes within the school environment, a need for more staff to help, and better ways of scheduling special needs students, their overall concerns reflected the ways that they utilize the resources available and view attributes within the building. This is indicated by comments regarding the manner in which they help students in their classrooms.

Within this group of teachers, there were many ways reported in which students receive help. A few examples are: positioning the student close to the teacher if they are distractible, testing the student separately and using flashcards, guiding students' hands individually for writing, designing each lesson so that everyone can be successful, putting students in groups "so no one looks like they're getting help," and helping individual students to get started so that they can then work independently.

Five of the emergent themes (Positive shared decision-making, Positive inclusion, Modifications, Principal, and Ways to help students) were referred to by all six of the teachers. Four other emergent themes were identified by five of the six regular classroom teachers. Examples of teachers' comments in these themes included: "It's a committee decision with almost everything we do." "Students get to spend time with their peers and don't feel different." "Inclusion shows all the kids that everybody can learn." "This is so much better than busing the kids to different schools." "Students don't seem to notice any difference between students."

## **Discussion**

### **Shared Decision-Making Impacting Inclusion**

The results of this case study strongly suggest that shared decision-making can impact the process and resolve barriers to inclusion for special needs students. Given the fact that the most reported barrier to inclusion was concerns with modifications, it becomes more relevant that deciding on modifications as a team at SAT (Student Assistance Team) and IEP (Individualized Education Program) meetings is viewed by teachers as a way to resolve inclusion barriers, and provides teachers opportunities to participate in decisions. Setout (2001) reminds us that while inclusion is not required, it is necessary to utilize a team to determine the least restrictive environment for the child.

A team approach was substantiated by the teachers' comments in this case study. As one teacher said, "The outcome of shared decision-making at this school is to get the best possible situation going for that child." Another teacher commented, "Regular classroom teachers are included by giving input into scheduling the student."

### **Shared Decision-Making Resolving Barriers for Inclusion**

Problems exist with the implementation of inclusion because of lack of training for teachers and lack of administrative support, according to Crockett and Kauffman (1998). This case study confirms the teachers' feelings of inadequacy concerning training and knowledge by teachers wanting to know more about disabilities, with lack of training being identified by five of the six teachers as a barrier to inclusion. However, support by the principal in this study is indicated with statements such as, "The principal was right there and got something done" and "Our principal is involved with the IEP meetings and in the process." Literature confirms that the principal's support is key to effective inclusionary practice (Rude & Anderson, 1992).

While Nolet and McLaughlin (2000) recommend that all teachers become skilled at making accommodations in order to be able to demonstrate that all students can make meaningful progress in the general curriculum, a study by Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) indicated that teachers surveyed responded that they lacked the skills or training to modify instruction, much like the teachers in the current study when they requested more strategies and techniques.

While teachers are being resourceful in developing ways to help students be successful in classrooms, the actual modifications on students' IEPs are possibly not being followed. Instead of interpreting this as little correlation between what teachers should be doing and what they are doing, an alternative explanation could be that the regular classroom teachers do know the students better, as they suggest. A study by Vaughn and Schumm (1996) revealed that general educators are unlikely to make extensive time-consuming adaptations that they do not believe to be effective practice. Their study further reported that teachers were more comfortable with considering or accepting teaching techniques and practices that stemmed from their own ranks.

More collaboration time and discussion within SAT and IEP meetings could lead to further modifications being placed on the IEPs as recommended by the regular classroom teachers since they have many suggested modifications that would benefit students. By communicating at the IEP meetings what the students' needs are and ways to help the student in the classroom, the regular education teachers will help to create more beneficial IEPs for students.

Lack of time to collaborate with special and regular educators together was indicated by comments about teachers needing "...time for special educators and regular educators to talk together." Graden and Bauer (1991) emphasize that inclusive education cannot be successful without collaboration since inclusion is predicated on professionals working together for the purpose of improving the education of all students in the school.

## **Regular Educators Included in the Decision-Making Process**

A teacher reporting, “The teacher has input about what’s going on and we sit down as a team to decide what’s best for the student” supports the idea of shared decision-making. As one teacher reported, “Shared decision-making improves inclusion because everybody has a different opinion and everybody sees a child differently.” Getting together and discussing those differences to provide the best services benefits the child. Regular educators share in decisions that assist in implementing inclusion within this school at SAT and IEP meetings by scheduling and planning for curriculum, with modifications through collaboration, and by determining what’s best for the students.

### **Summary**

Teachers are requesting training and knowledge about characteristics of disabilities, strategies, and techniques to better instruct special needs students, as well as asking for methods to implement inclusion practices in their classrooms. Finding time for regular and special educators to collaborate becomes the responsibility of the principal. Although this will be a challenge, indications are that this would be a worthwhile endeavor that would increase opportunities for shared decision-making, provide time to work as a team, and contribute to ownership, which would help to resolve barriers to inclusion and improve inclusion practices within this school. The benefits of this have been demonstrated within this case study and substantiated by research.

The supporting data from this case study indicates that while teachers feel positive regarding shared decision-making, they want more time for collaboration and sharing ideas. Teachers despite continued concerns about modifications indicate positive feelings regarding inclusion and ways to help special needs students. The current study conducted in this rural elementary school supports what researchers have recognized, that how educational leaders interpret the principles of Least Restrictive Environment has a significant effect on how schools are structured and classrooms designed to address the needs of all students (Crockett and Kauffman, 1998), and that teachers’ beliefs about instruction focus on meeting the needs of the class as a whole rather than on implementing specific instructional practices that will meet the needs of target students (Vaughn & Schumm, 1996).

According to one of the teachers interviewed for this study, “Shared decision-making has an impact on how teachers feel about inclusion - and that’s half the battle.” There is a continuing need to understand the importance of shared decision-making and the beneficial implementation of inclusion for students with disabilities. The six teachers interviewed for this case study had a combined 144 years of experience with a range of 17 to 30 years, yielding an average of 24 years of experience. Allowing teachers with acquired knowledge to share in decisions will lead to benefits for special needs students.

Further investigation of these topics will improve theory, research, and practice for instruction that will benefit all students.

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