

ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS'  
EXPERIENCES OF INCLUSION FOR STUDENTS WITH  
MODERATE TO SEVERE DISABILITIES: A  
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Shannon Boone Anders

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctorate of Education

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of special education teachers regarding inclusive practices with students with moderate and severe disabilities in a rural North Carolina school district. The purpose of this research was to seek the overall essence of the lived experiences of a purposeful criterion sample of 11 special education teachers as they used inclusion strategies with their students. This study had one central question: How do rural special education teachers describe their experiences with inclusive practices for their students with moderate to severe disabilities? The theories guiding this study were Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Bandura's social cognitive theory, and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. The hierarchy of needs theory influences both teachers and their students with disabilities in that both groups must have their basic needs met in order to be motivated and experience success. The social cognitive theory uses the self-efficacy construct to look at how teacher efficacy influences classroom achievement and teachers' perception of their ability to motivate student learning. The zone of proximal development provides insight into students' development and the setting in which to educate them. Data was collected via interviews, observations, and focus groups. Teachers reflected on their overall experiences and reported challenges, frustrations, and instructional strategies. Analysis consisted of phenomenological reduction methods. I used bracketing, coding, and memoing to identify themes and patterns within the data. I provided areas of future study concerning special education teachers in the area of inclusive practices for students with moderate to severe disabilities.

*Keywords:* inclusion, inclusive practices, moderate/severe disabilities, special education teachers, perspectives, self-efficacy

### **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Bobby, and my two daughters, Tara and Tegan. Your love and support gave me the strength to continue on this journey. Bobby, thank you for your unwavering belief that I would succeed. Tara, thank you for your encouragement through writing and computer tips and for taking movie breaks with me. Tegan, thank you for your reassurance and for posting all those “Mom, You’re Smart” awards on the refrigerator. I thank the Lord daily for sending me such a wonderful family.

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I would also like to express my appreciation and love to my family who have helped me through many, many school years. I would like to thank my parents, Dwight and Debbie Boone, who have always believed in the power of education and who taught me that “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Philippians, 4:13

I would also like to thank my aunt, Wanda Boone, for supporting me. Thank you for being my traveling companion and for being so generous with your time, spirit, and love.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

### **Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)**

Dynamic Assessment (DA)

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA)

Individual Education Program (IEP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Children (PARC)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

In the last decade, educators increased their attention on the inclusion of students with moderate to severe disabilities in general education classes. Now we see the focus shifting from whether to serve students with disabilities in the general classrooms, to how to serve all students, both with and without disabilities, effectively (Cameron & Cook, 2013). Inclusive practices have various definitions and interpretations in today's educational system. Policy and legislation such as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004, and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 have issued a challenge to school districts to reexamine the provision of educational services. The amount of education received by students with moderate to severe disabilities, in a general education classroom, has increased because educators must promote students' access to the general curriculum (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The substantial support needs of students with moderate to severe disabilities create added stress for teachers who may not have had adequate experience with implementing inclusive practices (Downing, 2010). This could result in negative attitudes and perceptions toward inclusion, affecting the quality of the education provided (Jacobs & Harvey, 2010).

The focus of a transcendental phenomenological study is to explore the meaning and essence of the lived experiences of special education teachers as it relates to the phenomenon of inclusive practices for students with moderate to severe disabilities (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). With the continued focus on accountability and academic achievement of all students, including students with intense disabilities, it is important for educators to comprehend the variables that affect special education teachers' attitudes and experiences toward inclusive practices.

## Background

Historically, special education has developed into a comprehensive service delivery system. The way in which we educate students with disabilities has been evolving for over 100 years, with placement questions beginning as early as the 1970s. Students began to receive the right to free and appropriate education due to extensive family and teacher advocacy. This advocacy resulted in litigation such as *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971, 1972) and *Mills v. Board of Education* (1982), safeguarding educational opportunities for all students with disabilities (Downing, 2010). Following such litigation, Congress validated the need for the least restrictive environment (LRE) by passing Public Law (P.L.) 94-124, The Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Downing, 2010).

The struggles in the beginning led to new laws and policies concerning the educational placement of students with disabilities. The copious factors that drive educational service delivery include advocacy efforts, policy initiatives, legislative mandates, and the growing research base (Carter, Moss, Hoffman, Chung, & Sisco, 2011). Now, general education is the first considered option for service delivery.

Legislative and policy initiatives (IDEA, 1997, 2004; No Child Left Behind Act, 2002; President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002) challenge educators to rethink location of service delivery and concentrate on educational programming (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Downing, 2010). These initiatives imply that students with disabilities should participate in general education classes as well as have meaningful access to the general curriculum. Current educational policy emphasizes teacher effectiveness, which challenges special education teachers. Evaluation systems now focus on academic achievement of all students (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2013). This also means schools are held

accountable for ensuring that students with disabilities demonstrate adequate progress on standards aligned with the general curriculum (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Downing, 2010).

Even with school reform and restructure, teachers continue to have questions concerning how to serve students with moderate to severe disabilities in general education classrooms. There is still a great deal of inexperience and lack of knowledge, which negatively impacts the implementation of inclusion. Neither special education nor general education teachers have had an adequate amount of successful experiences with inclusion resulting in the continued questioning of how to provide effective instruction (Downing, 2010). Although the world of special education continues to evolve, teacher training and staff development has not increased. This leaves educators unprepared and feeling inept when attempting to meet the needs of special education students (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Male, 2011). The problems certainly intensify for teachers as the needs intensify such as with a student with moderate or severe disabilities. This results in teachers developing negative perceptions of inclusion and their ability to be effective teachers (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McNully, 2012). Research indicates teachers have negative views of inclusion; they feel unprepared to meet the responsibilities and demands of students with disabilities (Blecker & Boakes, 2010; Brackenreed, 2011; Fuchs, 2010; Glazzard, 2011). This could also lead to frustration and resentment, which can result in teacher attrition. These issues and feelings may continue to feed negative attitudes toward inclusion and inclusive practices (Coutsocostas & Alborz, 2010; de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011). In fact, negative attitudes of teachers can affect the quality of education, not just for special education students, but also for all students (Jacobs & Harvey, 2010). Research has shown that negative attitudes increase with grade level because inclusion presents more challenges as students proceed through the system (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001; Mazurek & Winzer, 2011; Tkachyk, 2013). The attitudes toward inclusion tend to be more negative for secondary teachers than for elementary



teachers (Connor, Bickens, & Bitman, 2009; Kozik, Cooney, Vinciguerra, Gradel & Black, 2009). Much of the existing research focuses on general education teachers' experiences with inclusion, but there are no qualitative studies existing that focus on special education teachers' experiences. This gap in literature also includes information on effective instructional practices, components of successful inclusion, evidence based practice, and special education teacher self-efficacy.

This research study examined the lived experiences of special education teachers who engage in inclusive practices. It adds to the existing literature on inclusion by providing rich, in-depth descriptions of teacher experiences. By focusing specifically on special education teachers, it adds new information on teacher perspectives by only focusing on special education teachers. This study has the potential to expand the quality of life and education for both special education teachers and students. By providing a voice to those who use inclusive practices, it may ultimately advance special education teachers' self-efficacy and effectiveness.

### **Situation to Self**

I have been a special education teacher for students with moderate to severe disabilities for 10 years. During that time, the most daunting task has been the implementation of inclusion practices for my students. I have encountered resistance from both general education and special education teachers for various reasons. Because of the small size and limited resources, it seems to be more challenging to implement inclusion practices in rural areas. Due to the obstacles, the goal of my research was not to advocate for inclusion, but to describe the experiences of others. I gained an understanding of my own working environment using a social constructivist paradigm as described by Vygotsky (2012).

The philosophical assumptions that led me to this study were ontological and epistemological in nature. Ontology is the study of the nature of being and considered the

beginning point of research (Crotty, 1998; Grix, 2004). “It is concerned with ‘what is’, with the nature of existence, with the structure of reality as such” (Crotty, 1998, p.10). Crotty (1998) stated that the ontological position of the researcher linked with the epistemological position determines the methodological approach. Grix (2004) goes on to define epistemology as concerning the researcher’s knowledge of social reality. I am aware that different realities exist in terms of individual experiences with inclusive practices. I linked that knowledge of inclusive practices with the awareness of its influence on my methodological approach. Through interactions with the participants, I was able to draw meaning from their views of reality and being. I used an epistemological view when I interviewed and observed participants, spending time with them in their environment. This allowed me to focus on their experiences that I might understand the phenomenon from their perspective.

### **Problem Statement**

There is no legal definition of inclusion, and because of this, myriad definitions have formed a spectrum of inclusive practices. This spectrum can span from just social inclusion and mainstreaming to full inclusion. Regardless of the type of inclusion considered for each student, the special education teacher carries the responsibility to ensure success for all students under his or her care. Special education teachers must provide opportunities for their students to meaningfully access the general curriculum and be able to participate socially in a general education classroom to the best extent of their abilities. This is quite a challenge for teachers in light of the many obstacles that often present themselves (De Bortoli, Balandin, Foreman, Mathisen, & Arthur-Kelly, 2012). The complexity and faster paced instruction of general education (Kozik et al., 2009) has led to negative attitudes toward inclusion (Berry, 2010; Brackenreed, 2011). Negative attitudes can affect teacher interaction with students in the classroom (Poulou, 2009). Glazzard (2011) identified negative beliefs as one of the primary

barriers to effective inclusion. Teachers have expressed concern about how to meet the needs of students with moderate to severe disabilities in the general education classroom (Berry, 2010; Cameron & Cook, 2013). The problem this study sought to address is the limited information available concerning special education teachers experiences of the various inclusive practices on the spectrum. The problem also included the limited information and experiences of students with moderate to severe disabilities in the general education classroom. There have been few investigations to identify rural special educators' attitudes, instructional practices, what the teachers see in terms of educational performance, and outcomes.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the daily-lived experiences of special education teachers in the phenomenon of inclusive practices for students with moderate to severe disabilities in a rural western North Carolina school district. I provided a rich, descriptive voice for the teachers who share the phenomenon of using inclusive practices with students with moderate to severe disabilities. The three theories guiding this study were Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Bandura's social cognitive theory, and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. The Hierarchy of Needs pertains to this study because it provides insight into the basic needs of both students and teachers and how teachers may influence the outcomes of their students. Social cognitive theory lends understanding to how learning occurs and how teachers perceive their effectiveness in stimulating learning. The Zone of Proximal development is important to this study because it provides a foundation for inclusive practices by stating that the principles of development are the same for all children. Understanding special education teacher experiences and perceptions of inclusive practices affords the opportunity to serve students with moderate to severe disabilities appropriately and to improve the daily life and skills of the teachers.

### **Significance of the Study**

The number of students with moderate to severe disabilities who receive instruction in the general education classroom is continually increasing (Friend & Bursuck, 2009; McLeskey, 2011). With this in mind, it is important for educators and administrators in North Carolina to increase their understanding of the variables that influence teacher attitudes and experiences toward inclusive practices. Prior research indicated educators' reservations about their ability to work successfully in inclusive environments (Cook, 2004; Friend & Bursuck, 2009). The significance of this study was to elucidate the experiences of rural special education teachers as they attempt inclusive practices with students with moderate to severe disabilities. This study is empirically significant because it adds to the literature on teachers' perceptions and experiences with inclusion and instruction for students with intensive needs. There is an abundance of research on the social benefits, opinions of inclusion, and pullout instruction delivery (Copeland & Cosby, 2009; Downing & Peckham-Harding, 2008; McDonnell, Johnson, Polychronis, & Kercher, 2007); however, there is a gap in the research concerning effective instructional strategies and practices, teacher efficacy, and the critical components of successful inclusion. This study adds to the body of literature by pursuing an unexplored group of teachers and their experiences with inclusive practices. Feng and Sass (2013) found that low efficacy and job dissatisfaction resulted in increased attrition rates among teachers. My rationale for this study originated with my aspiration to improve the overall working experience of special education teachers. Information from this study could potentially provide useful information for teachers on inclusive practices, concerning critical components of successful inclusion, effective instructional strategies, and evidence-based practices, which could improve teacher self-efficacy and decrease the attrition rates.

## **Research Questions**

The examination of the experiences of rural special education teachers regarding inclusive practices with students with moderate to severe disabilities is central to the purpose of this phenomenological study. From the related literature review, one central question and five sub questions were developed using Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory (1977), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1993). Bandura's theory postulates that people learn by observing others within the context of experiences, observations, and interactions with others (Bandura, 2001). Self-efficacy can influence perceptions and increase motivation (Bandura, 1994). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs also influences perception through motivation. The needs that motivate humans are hierarchical (Maslow, 1943) and the satisfaction of basic needs promotes classroom success for both teachers and students. Vygotsky's (2012) Zone of Proximal Development provides a theoretical foundation for inclusive practices based on the assertion that the principles of development are the same for all children, regardless of ability.

The central research question that guided this study was:

How do rural special education teachers describe their experiences with inclusive practices for their students with moderate to severe disabilities?

The four sub-questions were as follows:

- What are the differences in experiences of inclusive practices between elementary and secondary special education teachers?
- How do special educators describe their experiences with social and academic inclusion?
- What additional resources do special education teachers see as important for them to engage effectively in inclusive instruction?

- What obstacles hinder rural special education teachers from effectively engaging in inclusive instruction?

The central research question asked - How do rural special education teachers describe their experiences with inclusive practices for their students with moderate to severe disabilities? This question sought to increase understanding of how special educators perceive and practice inclusion. It provides insight into the strategies they are using and their perceived success. It provides a better understanding of the participants' self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) defined perceived self-efficacy as "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" (p. 2). The research of Beacham and Rouse (2012) indicated that teachers have positive attitudes toward inclusion overall, but lacked confidence in the actual implementation of inclusive practices. Research related to inclusion and teacher efficacy revealed that teachers who view themselves as successful in teaching students with disabilities are more open to inclusion (Brownell & Pajares, 1999; Cameron & Cook, 2013).

The first sub-question asked - What are the differences in experiences of inclusive practices between elementary and secondary special education teachers? This question was created to address how inclusive education changes for students as they progress through school. Studies documented success among students in preschool settings (Allen & Cowdery, 2014) and primary grades, but the amount of time in inclusive classes tends to decrease in secondary schools (Agran, Wehmeyer, Cavin & Palmer, 2010). The extensive support needs of students with moderate to severe disabilities (Kennedy & Horn, 2004), coalesced with the intensified challenges associated with inclusion in secondary school environments (Fox & Ysseldyke, 1997) have inspired educators and researchers to pursue and evaluate effective support models that

ensure those students access and progress within the general curriculum (Cushing, Carter, Clark, Wallis, & Kennedy, 2009).

The second sub-question asked - How do special educators' describe their experiences of social and academic inclusion? This question addressed the educators' perceptions of inclusion models, both social and academic, and their experiences with more intense needs within the different models. The differences can address perceptions and experiences because the participants included in this study are special education teachers who have students receiving various levels of inclusion ranging from a separate setting with mainstreaming opportunities to partial or full inclusion. Many students with moderate to severe disabilities receive their core academics in a separate setting and attend part of the day in the general education setting for socialization with peers. Both Alquraiani and Gut, (2012) and Westling and Fox, (2009) referred to this as social or partial inclusion. Full or academic inclusion involves the total emersion of students into general education with supports (Logan & Wimer, 2013). At the heart of this question was to determine where do educators feel their students fall, or should fall, on the inclusion spectrum? The legislative and policy initiatives require educators to rethink the location of instruction and focus on educational programming (Carter et al., 2011). A study by Nolen, Horn, Ward, and Childers (2011) found that teachers do not implement ideas or a program if they do not feel it is beneficial to students. Special education teachers have reported difficulty in deciding between practices that benefits one student with special needs (Greenway, McCollow, Hudson, Peck, & Davis, 2013).

The third sub-question asked - What additional resources do special education teachers see as important for them to engage effectively in inclusion instruction? Success in the classroom is related to high self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994). If teachers' basic needs are being

met, they feel more effective and have higher job satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010), which is also related to increased self-efficacy.

The last sub-question asked - What obstacles hinder special education teachers from engaging in effective inclusive instruction in the classroom? There are obstacles that continue to be difficult for special educators to overcome such as limited professional development opportunities, resources, and supports (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). This can make it increasingly difficult to pinpoint the best methods, and even the setting, for instruction for their students with disabilities. This research question also examined whether these challenges intensify based on the rural setting of special education teachers. The literature points to several challenges for inclusion classrooms including: inadequate systemic supports, the complex needs of students with disabilities, and lack of training and experience with students with disabilities (De Bortoli et al., 2012).

### **Research Plan**

A transcendental phenomenological design was suitable for this study, as all of the participants have lived the shared experience of being special education teachers for students with moderate to severe disabilities. Phenomenology provided the rich, descriptive data to describe the experiences of the co-researchers as detailed by the research questions. Based on Fraelich's (1989) philosophy, I referred to the participants in this study as co-researchers who were able to contribute jointly to this study. The co-researchers in this study were 10-15 special education teachers who provide inclusive instruction to students with moderate to severe disabilities. Data collection included two individual interviews with co-researchers, an observation in the classroom, and then a focus group. I analyzed the data using Moustakas' (1994) recommendations for transcendental phenomenological research including phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and the synthesis of meanings and essences.



Information was analyzed using bracketing and horizontalization during the phenomenological reduction step of the research process.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations can control the study as well as elucidate the research boundaries for the study, while limitations cannot control the study and are prospective weaknesses (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The scope of this study limited co-researchers to include a minimum of 10 special education teachers with four or more years of experience teaching special education, at least one student receiving special education services and diagnosed with moderate or severe intellectual disability, and engages in some type of inclusionary instruction or activity with special education students. A purposeful delimitation of this study was that it concentrated on the lived experiences of special education teachers from only one rural school district.

### **Definitions**

In order to clarify the significant words of the current qualitative study, the subsequent definitions of terms are included.

1. *Disability* – A student who meets the eligibility requirements in the following areas as determined by evaluations for autism, deaf-blindness, developmental delay, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, serious emotional disability, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, or visual impairment (including blindness) (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2014).
2. *Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)* – Every student ages three through 21 is ensured a free and appropriate public education, including students with disabilities (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2014).

3. *Inclusion* – Inclusion occurs when a student with a disability is immersed in the general education setting alongside peers without disabilities (Westling & Fox, 2009)
4. *Least Restrictive Environment* – Students with disabilities should be educated alongside students without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2014).
5. *Moderate to Severe Disability* – Intellectual functioning that is well below the mean on a standardized intelligence test, meaning the student is three or more standard deviations below the mean plus or minus one standard area of measure (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2014).
6. *No Child Left Behind* – A reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. It supports setting high standards and measurable goals in order to improve educational outcomes. The intent of NCLB is to close the achievement gap by defining measures of flexibility, accountability, and choice (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).
7. *Special Education* - Special education is specifically designed instruction that meets the unique needs of a student with a disability (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2014).

### **Summary**

Special education has developed over the years from the humble beginnings of advocacy and litigation (*PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, 1971,1972; *Mills v. Board of Education*, 1982) to legislative policy and initiatives (IDEA, 1997, 2004; No Child Left Behind Act, 2002; President’s Commission on Excellence in Education, 2002). Recent educational policy stressed teacher effectiveness and the academic achievement of all students (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2013) and accountability (Downing, 2010). This has posed many

challenges for teachers, leaving them feeling unprepared to meet the needs of their special education students (Male, 2011). Special education teachers must provide social opportunities and access to the general curriculum. The complex and faster paced curriculum of general education can often become an obstacle (Kozik et al., 2009) that contributes to negative attitudes toward inclusion.

This study sought to address the problem of limited information regarding special education teachers' experiences with inclusive practices and the experiences of students with moderate to severe disabilities in the general education classroom. No qualitative studies addressed rural special education teachers' experiences with inclusive practices; therefore, this study will fill that gap in the literature. The purpose of this study was to understand the daily-lived experiences of special education teachers in the phenomenon of inclusive practices for students with moderate to severe disabilities in a rural western North Carolina school district.

This study is significant because it examined rural special education teachers' experiences as they attempt inclusive practices with students with moderate to severe disabilities. The empirical significance of this study is to add to the literature of teachers' perceptions and experiences with inclusion and instruction for students with intensive needs. It fills the gap in the research regarding effective instructional strategies and practices, teacher efficacy, and critical components of successful inclusion.

Using Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory, Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, and Vygotsky's (2012) Zone of Proximal Development I developed one central research question and four sub-questions.

The central research question was:

How do rural special education teachers describe their experiences with inclusive practices for their students with moderate to severe disabilities?

The four sub questions were as follows:

- What are the differences in experiences of inclusive practices between elementary and secondary teachers?
- How do special educators describe their experiences with social and academic inclusion?
- What additional resources do special education teachers see as important for them to engage effectively in inclusive instruction?
- What obstacles hinder special education teachers from effectively engaging in inclusive instruction?

In order to answer these questions, a qualitative study was suitable because it examined specifically special education teachers and their shared experiences as special educators practicing inclusion. A transcendental phenomenological design was appropriate for this study because all the co-researchers share the experience of being special education teachers for students with moderate to severe disabilities. These 10 to 15 co-researchers participated in interviews, observations, and focus groups. I analyzed the data using phenomenological reduction methods such as bracketing and horizontalization for identifying themes. A delimiter of this study concerns the concentration on the lived experiences of rural special education teachers from one school district. The limitations include transferability and research bias, due to the restricted sample size and the focus mainly on the experiences of Caucasian, female special education teachers.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

This chapter provides a review of the current literature pertaining to the development and advancements made in educating students with moderate to severe disabilities. The attitudes, beliefs, and practices in special education have evolved substantially since its inception (Downing, 2010). Opinions vary on the definition of inclusion as well as the efficacy of its practice (Ayres, Lowrey, Douglas, & Seivers, 2011). The attitudes and perceptions of teachers influence the success of inclusive practices (Cameron & Cook, 2013). Although advancements continue to develop for the inclusion students and educators, there is still much room for improvement. This literature review addresses the following aspects, (a) the theoretical framework supporting this study, (b) an historical overview of special educational services, (c) the current trends in special education, (d) the implementation of inclusion, (e) outcomes for inclusion, and (f) teacher attitudes and perceptions toward inclusive practices.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The three learning theories that inform the current study are Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Bandura's social learning theory, and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs addresses meeting basic human needs before learning and achievement can occur (Maslow, 1943). This pertains to students but can also be applicable to teachers who teach students with disabilities. Bandura's social cognitive theory with the constructs of self-regulation and self-efficacy is important to this study because it is useful for understanding student achievement. The third theory is Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This theory gives insight into the development of the conceptual thinking

ability in students with disabilities. It also makes connections concerning the setting in which to educate students with disabilities.

### **Hierarchy of Needs**

Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, related to learning and education through motivation, remains an important factor in effective instruction. Students cannot be successful in the classroom without being motivated to learn. Maslow's theory of motivation postulated that human actions are directly related to attaining goals (Maslow, 1943). Often represented as a hierarchical pyramid, Maslow's theory contains five levels of needs including physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). The basic idea behind this theory is that hierarchical needs motivate each person. After satisfying one need, a person is motivated to satisfy the next one as they travel up the hierarchy. A person cannot move up to the next levels until previous basic needs have been satisfied (Gorman, 2010). Gorman (2010) studied the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians using Maslow's framework. He discovered that because of cultural dislocation, they were unable to meet their lower level needs; thus, education was not important to them. To these groups, education did not meet their basic needs, so they were not motivated to work toward educating themselves. When all of a student's needs are met, the student is at an optimal point for learning (Ary et al., 2006). For example, if a student is hungry or worried about where to sleep at night, the student will not be as successful at learning as someone who is higher up in the hierarchy.

It is important to consider Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs when educating all students, but its importance increases when considering students with disabilities. Frederickson, Simmonds, Evans, and Soulsby (2007) discussed how important having a sense of belonging is to all students with exceptional needs. Sometimes this need can be difficult to meet for students

who may be remarkably different from other students. Frederickson et al. (2007) stated that effective social skills training for students with disabilities could increase their acceptance among their peers and create a sense of belonging. Meeting the needs of belonging provides an argument for inclusive education for students with disabilities. Inclusive practices provide more opportunities for students with disabilities to interact with their peers without disabilities. Inclusion provides students with disabilities opportunities to practice social skills with their peers that can increase their sense of belonging in the general education setting (Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, & Kaplan, 2007). Increasing a student's sense of belonging allows the student to move up the hierarchal level that increases his or her motivation to learn.

Since teachers have the potential to influence the outcomes for students with special needs, they can use inclusive practices to increase the opportunities for students with special needs in order to achieve a sense of belonging in the general education classroom (Downing, 2010). Teachers can explore ways to assist in getting student needs met and to facilitate their rise up the hierarchy. The needs of teachers can also fall along Maslow's (1943) hierarchy and can influence effective classroom instruction. Teachers' resource needs affect their ability to provide inclusive classroom instruction for students with disabilities as well as their motivation to implement inclusive strategies. Therefore, Maslow's hierarchy creates a focal point for this study to identify what motivates special education teachers in providing inclusive practices and the needed resources or obstacles that may hinder their progression up the hierarchy.

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

Bandura's social cognitive theory postulates that people learn through observation, modeling, and motivation (Bandura, 1986). Learning occurs through social interaction. Social cognitive theory contains three main elements, which constantly influence each other: people, environment, and behavior (Bandura, 1986). This learning theory supports educating students

with disabilities in inclusive classrooms through the idea that learning is dependent on social interaction. When students with disabilities participate in an inclusive classroom setting, they experience increased opportunities for socialization and exhibit improvement in social skills (Hunt, Soto, Maier, & Doering, 2003).

Special education teachers currently use the self-regulation aspect of the social cognitive theory to support inclusion. Bandura (1986) stated that people use self-regulation to monitor his or her responses or behavior. Self-regulated learning allows students to contribute to their personal learning goals (Zimmerman, 1989). Observation, modeling, and imitation are ways to learn and practice self-regulation (Bandura, 1991). It is applicable to all students, including students with special needs, but it is also relevant to special education teachers. Self-regulation can provide a foundation to pinpoint actions or behaviors of special education teachers in relation to inclusive practices applied during instruction. Bandura (1986) included three processes within self-regulation that apply to teachers during instruction. Those processes are self-regulation, self-judgment, and self-reaction. Teachers would practice self-observation to monitor their own behavior and outcomes based on their use of inclusive practices during instruction. Teachers would use the process of self-judgment to evaluate the effectiveness of their actions. During the third process of self-reaction, teachers would modify their behavior based on their self-judgment. These processes are important to the development of goals (Bandura, 1986).

The self-efficacy construct of social cognitive theory is a person's expectation of his or her ability to accomplish a task or goal (Bandura, 1994). This suggests that people have the capability to shape their own actions (Viel-Ruma, Houchins, Jolivette, & Benson, 2010). Bandura (1994) stated, "people avoid activities and situations they believe exceed their coping abilities. But they readily undertake challenging activities and select situations they judge themselves capable of handling" (p. 7). Individuals with high self-efficacy set higher goals and



are able to maintain motivation toward obtaining those goals. Those with low self-efficacy do not set high goals and lack the confidence and motivation to accomplish those goals (Bandura, 1994). When applying the idea of self-efficacy to inclusion it would imply that a teacher with high self-efficacy believes all students with disabilities should be included in general education. A teacher with low self-efficacy believes there is little he or she can do as a teacher to create successful inclusion for all students with disabilities (Sharma, Loreman, & Folin, 2012). Self-efficacy is important to both students with special needs and their special education teachers. It is important to this study because of its usefulness in understanding student achievement.

Self-efficacy for teachers pertains to the teacher's expectation that he or she can inspire learning in the classroom (Bandura, 1994; Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Bandura's (1986) human agency concept gives the responsibility for making change to the individual (Viel-Ruma et al., 2010). Ashton and Webb (1986) found that teacher self-efficacy had an effect on instructional practices and student outcomes. Teacher efficacy can influence the academic achievement and climate of the whole school (Bandura, 1994). This theory is necessary to the current study because a teachers' belief that he or she can stimulate learning through inclusive practices is relevant to the success of students with disabilities.

### **Zone of Proximal Development**

Lev Vygotsky (2012) observed that a child is capable of learning more with the help of an adult or more advanced peer than he or she could learn independently. He transformed this common observation into a theory. Vygotsky created the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in relation to the social cognitive theory. The ZPD is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). The ZPD is the difference between the two

levels (Vygotsky, 2012). Vygotsky supported his theory of ZPD with an example of a young child learning to walk by holding an adult's hand. The task of walking for the young child was too difficult to be accomplished alone, but could be accomplished with an older, more proficient person. This analogy can serve as an example for educators to make similar cognitive and developmental connections. The ZPD places emphasis on what a student can achieve. It makes a connection between development and instruction (Vygotsky, 1978). Through ZPD, educators may see a student's current abilities as well as the student's potential for learning.

Vygotsky's (2012) theory left lasting impressions on instruction. It applies to inclusive practices and strategies in several ways. Guk and Kellogg (2007) found that teachers could use ZPD in their instruction with students to model and teach new skills. Research indicates that ZPD is also applicable to student interaction through peer-mediated instruction (Guk & Kellogg, 2007, as well as co-teaching and cooperative planning (Reilly & Mitchell, 2010; Schmitz & Winskel, 2008). In these instructional methods, students who have a better understanding of the presented skill, provide support or scaffolding for students with lower ability. Vygotsky's (2012) theory for instructional methods often used in special education such as cooperative learning, scaffolding, and communication in social situations. In designing instructional approaches, Vygotsky asserted the significance of examining a student's readiness level. This includes acknowledging the prior knowledge and skills possessed by the student toward instructional goals (Vygotsky, 2012).

Although ZPD refers to interactions between teachers and students, it is also applicable to interactions among teachers. Shabani, Katib, and Ebadi (2010) found that ZPD helps to explain the collaboration of general education and special education specialists and teachers. The idea is that collaboration affects teachers' ZPD because they benefit from support and encouragement of their co-workers. Shabani, et al. (2010) described social interaction as a factor that facilitates

ZPD development among educators. They applied Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to teachers' professional development by linking it to social characteristics of teacher learning. It would lend support to the idea that ZPD elucidates the collaboration between special education and general education teachers with each educator being an expert in his or her field. For example, the general education teacher demonstrates an expertise in general education curriculum and the special education teacher is an expert on special education curriculum and modifications. Each teacher learns while the other applies his or her expertise to a situation. In this case, the ZPD would mean that a teacher could accomplish more with the assistance of another teacher than either could accomplish alone.

### **Historical Overview**

The evolution of educational services for students with moderate to severe disabilities has shown substantial outcomes from the initial attitudes and beliefs. In the beginning, children with disabilities were generally thought of as incapable of learning and placed in institutions for care (Blatt, 1981; Downing, 2010). By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the practice of institutionalization was being questioned by families, teachers, and outside advocates (Downing, 2010). Families began challenging the practice of institutionalization and advocating for educational rights. The earliest legislation that arose from this activism was *Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971, 1972) and *Mills v. Board of Education* (1982). Such legislation stipulated educational opportunities for all students with disabilities and served as a catalyst for Public Law 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Downing, 2010). Although this early act provided a predilection toward the placement of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, the choices on the continuum of placement options within the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) resulted in the relegation of students with severe disabilities to special

schools and/or special classrooms (Downing, 2010; McLeskey, Henry & Hodges, 1999).

Educating students, with whom they had little or no experience, challenged educators. This resulted in the creation of an educational approach, which did not aide the academic curriculum taught in the general education classrooms (Downing, 2010).

### **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act**

The reauthorization of the All Handicapped Education Act of 1975 resulted in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990, 1997, and the recent Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 (Downing, 2010). IDEA has six core principles: (a) identification and evaluation that is non-discriminatory, (b) least restrictive environment (LRE), (c) free appropriate public education (FAPE), (d) no reject, (e) due process, and (f) student and parent involvement and shared decision-making (Heward, 2006; Hodge & Krumm, 2009). This act mandates that students with disabilities should be educated alongside their peers without disabilities as much as possible (Alquraini & Gut, 2012), as long as the setting meets the student's academic goals (Kilanowski-Press, Foote, & Rinaldo, 2010). It includes the requirement that teachers use evidence-based instructional practices to teach core content (IDEA, 2004, Sec. 663 (c) [5] [E]). It procures a continuum of service options for students with disabilities and encourages a focus on inclusive practice (Kilanowski-Press et al., 2010). IDEA states that every child with a disability must be educated in the least restrictive environment, but it is important to note that the word "inclusion" is not used anywhere within IDEA (Keele, 2004). This means that IDEA does not specifically mandate the inclusion model.

### **Least Restrictive Environment**

The term least restrictive environment (LRE), which is a mandate of IDEA (2004), includes the preconception for educating students with disabilities in the general education classroom (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). The LRE mandate provided the legislative

foundational support for the push toward inclusive education for students with disabilities.

McLeskey, Rosenberg, and Westling (2010) defined the setting for this movement as the general education classroom where students with disabilities are fully functioning and highly regarded participants that receive appropriate supports to promote their success. The mandate itself, paired with the idea of inclusion, is widely supported by parents, education professionals, researchers, and advocates for students with disabilities (McLeskey, 2007; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Zigmond, 2003); however, the actual implementation of the LRE mandate is a disputable topic that has divided stakeholders and school professionals (McLeskey, 2007; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Zigmond, Kloo, & Volonino, 2009). The debate on least restrictive environment continues with advocates asking for complete emersion in the general education classroom (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Downing, 2010; Moore, 1996; Wolfe & Hall, 2003), and opponents asking for mainstreaming and pulls out options (Agran & Alper, 2000; DeBortoli, et al., 2012; Vann, 1997).

### **No Child Left Behind**

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2004) states that all children in the public education system are general education students (Sailor & Roger, 2005). It infers that students with disabilities should be actively participating in general education classes and should have meaningful access with the general curriculum. There are five foundational principles of NCLB: (a) Highly qualified teachers, (b) Evidence-based instruction, (c) Safe schools, (d) Parent choice and participation, and (e) Accountability (Hodge & Krumm, 2009; Turnbull, 2005).

NCLB requires that students receive academic instruction from highly qualified teachers. McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, and Hoppey (2012) speculated that this provision had a substantial impact on the placement of students in less restrictive environments. Numerous special education teachers were not highly qualified when the mandate was passed, which may

have increased the placing of students with disabilities in general education (McLeskey et al., 2012). This allowed schools to meet the highly qualified requirement by pairing special education teachers with content area specialists in co-teaching situations (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; McLeskey et al., 2010).

NCLB requires teachers to use evidence-based instructional practices in order to provide instruction to students with disabilities (Spooner, Knight, Browder, & Smith, 2011). Evidence-based practices are academic programs and instructional strategies that have evidence to prove that they yield consistent positive student outcomes (Tankersley, Harjusola-Webb, & Landrum, 2008). Cook et al. (2008) further expanded this definition by asserting that a crucial goal of special education is to use instructional strategies that have prior evidence that they improve behavior outcomes and increase the learning of students with disabilities over time. If students with mild disabilities require validated and effective procedures for optimal learning, then it is imperative to apply the most efficient and effective strategies for teaching students with more severe disabilities (Spooner et al., 2011).

NCLB holds schools accountable for ensuring that students with disabilities demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP) on standards aligned to the general curriculum (Carter & Kennedy, 2006). Not only the whole students population, but also its identified subgroups must achieve AYP, which includes students with disabilities (Feng & Sass, 2013). This has only added to the contention between advocates and non-supporters of inclusion. One result of AYP has been that more than 13 percent of schools that do not meet AYP standards fall short because they have not attained the standards set for their students with disabilities (Soifer, 2006). This failure of the subgroup of special education students is mainly due to the fact that those students are expected to produce the same proficiency levels as their general education peers who are not disabled (Eckes & Swando, 2009).

NCLB has resulted in teachers being required to attend training on the implementation of its mandates (Riley, 2012). However, Shealey, Mchatton, & Farmer (2009) found that teachers who attended mandatory training on NCLB reported fewer positive changes in school support of the mandates and in their instruction. The teachers who participated in this study supported higher student standards, but did not understand the essence of special education (Shealey et al., 2009).

The federal mandates of NCLB challenge special educators in rural areas. Regarding student progress, Berry and Gravelle (2013) stated, “despite teacher effectiveness, a small number of special needs students can create artificial volatility in achievement scores, hindering the school’s ability to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP)” (p. 27). The NCLB sanctions that are imposed on schools that do not make AYP include a reduction in federal funds, money redistribution, and offering the option of school choice (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). The mandate requiring highly qualified teachers, which includes special education teachers, can negatively affect schools in rural settings where recruitment and retention are already a problem (Hodge & Krumm, 2009). School districts cannot recruit and retain highly qualified teachers because they cannot compete with other areas in terms of teacher salaries, programs, and services (Brownell et al., 2005; Berry & Gravelle, 2013). These kinds of consequences put tension on the morale of both the teachers and the school districts.

### **Summary of Current Legislation**

Both IDEA (1997) and NCLB (2004) adopted the purpose of providing and strengthening appropriate education for students with disabilities. They emphasized the rights of students with disabilities to receive an education by highly qualified teachers in a classroom with their non-disabled peers (Kilanowski-Press et al., 2010). The copious factors serving as the driving force behind the shift in focus and location of service delivery include legislative mandates, advocacy

efforts, policy, initiatives, and a growing research base (Carter et al., 2011). IDEA uses LRE to strengthen inclusionary practices (Moore, 1996), demanding that general education placement be the first option considered.

Because many school districts fail to make AYP due to the proficiency issues of the special education subgroup, some reviewers have commented on an existing conflict between NCLB and IDEA (Gordon, 2006; Keele, 2004; Olson, 2004; Rentschler, 2006). For example, IDEA stresses individualized assessment and NCLB focuses on a grade-level approach to assessment (Eckes & Swando, 2009). There is also a conflict between IDEA and NCLB's testing and subgroup accountability requirements. The subgroup accountability requirement expects students with disabilities to increase their assessment scores almost twice as fast as their peers without disabilities (Eckes & Swando, 2009). NCLB does acknowledge the need for some students to have accommodations on standardized tests, but some feel the requirements are too rigid (Shindel, 2004). NCLB does not allow some accommodations that are included in student IEPs, reaffirming the conflict between the two laws (Neill, Guisbond, & Schaffer, 2004). This confirms the need for a more accurate way of assessing the achievement levels of students with disabilities (Aron & Loprest, 2012).

### **Current Trends in Special Education**

Efforts to provide the basic rights of students with disabilities and the demands to meet governmental requirements led to the inclusion model that exists now. Inclusion means educating students with disabilities in the general education classroom setting with their peers without disabilities under the instruction of a general education teacher (Arthur-Kelly, Foreman, Bennett, & Pascoe, 2008; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001). Operti and Brady (2011) affirmed, "inclusive education is increasingly considered to be the provision of high-quality, friendly, and diverse learning environment for all" (p. 460). It also means that all students have the chance to



learn and participate within a group of peers with the necessary services and supports for students to benefit from educational activities (Ryndak, Jackson, & Billingsley, 2000). Hunt et al. (2003) stated that inclusion is founded on the beliefs that:

1. All children can learn;
2. All children have the right to be educated with their peers in age appropriate heterogeneous classroom within their neighborhood schools;
3. It is the responsibility of the school community to meet the educational needs irrespective of their ability levels, national origin, and family, cultural, and linguistic background. (p. 315)

Often the students with disabilities are not expected to exhibit grade-level performance, but they are challenged to learn as much as possible. It is an expectation that these students will be actively engaged in all activities. Students participating in inclusive classrooms have access to grade-level core curriculum and work alongside peers without disabilities. They receive specifically designed instruction and supports within the context of the general education setting (Downing, 2010). Sharma et al. (2012) asserted that when adopting an inclusive philosophy it means, “schools exist to meet the needs of all the students; therefore, if a student is experiencing difficulty, the problem is with the schooling practices not with the student” (p. 12).

Teachers providing inclusive classrooms are asked to raise their expectations for their students with special needs. From the start of classroom instruction, IEP goals must align to the general curriculum standards (Agran, Alper, Cavin, Sinclair, Wehmeyer, & Hughes, 2005). In this case, the purpose of the IEP is to outline the plan to build in the supports needed for the student to learn challenging material. The supports make this material appropriate and meaningful according to the individual needs of the student as they participate in the general education classroom.

Although educators know the primary purpose of inclusion, the definition and implementation can vary. The values of educators can affect the interpretation and practice of inclusion. These values can include teacher feelings and beliefs toward inclusion. The values can filter down to affect a teacher's willingness to change his or her approaches, to embrace inclusion, and the teacher's flexibility in meeting student needs (Glazzard, 2011). Kilanowski-Press et al. (2010) suggested that inclusion, rather than being a delivery model, is a "frame of mind for a learning community" (p. 34). Among the educational community, it is a philosophy beginning globally and focusing on meeting individual student needs (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007; Kilanowski-Press et al., 2010). Opertti and Brady (2011) wanted to extend the range of inclusion so that the perception of inclusive education "visualizes the concepts of equity and quality as going hand in hand" (p. 461). Because there is not a definitive consensus regarding the interpretation of inclusion, research can be problematic. Lindsay (2003) postulates that this difficulty is due to problems with "operationalizing variables" during the research process (p. 6). Fore, Hagan-Burke, Boon, & Smith (2008) pointed out that "the only certainty regarding the effects of class placement is that there is no consensus" (p. 56).

In exploring the variations of inclusive practices, a distinction can be made between what occurs for students with moderate to severe disabilities in general education classrooms and what occurs for students without disabilities in the classroom (Cameron & Cook, 2013; Giangreco & Boer, 2005). Typically, the goals and objectives for students with moderate to severe disabilities focus on vocational, functional and social skills (Cameron & Cook, 2013; Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007; Westling & Fox, 2009). These students may receive their core academics, based on the general curriculum, in a separate setting but spend the rest of their day with peers in general education. Past research referred to this as partial inclusion (Alquriani & Gut, 2012; Westling & Fox, 2009), whereas, full inclusion consists of students with disabilities

being fully integrating students in general education with supports (Logan & Wimer, 2013). The U.S. Department of Education (2007) stated that as of 2007, only 16% of students with disabilities were being educated in general educational settings. Current research shows that 77.4% of students with disabilities spend at least 40% of their school day in the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The amount of time a student spends in the general education settings and separate settings is a decision made by the IEP team (Browder, 2011).

### **Partial Inclusion**

Currently, many researchers and proponents of inclusion believe inclusion is more about the quality of the educational experience rather than placement (Downing, 2010; Ferraioli & Harris, 2011; McLeskey et al., 2010; McLeskey et al., 2012; Sharma et al., 2012). Although classrooms should be responsive to the diverse needs of all students, there are sometimes limits to what can be accomplished. While many special education students make some gains, they are not all able to compete on the level of their peers (Ferraioli & Harris, 2011). There may be occasions when a student cannot benefit from full inclusion in the general education setting. Partial inclusion would then allow that student to receive special education services for intense academic needs in a separate setting, while participating in a general education classroom with their peers for all non-academic activities (Alquriani & Gut, 2012; Westling & Fox, 2009). This type of inclusion focuses primarily on social participation (de Boer et al., 2011). In this context, social participation is positive interaction, acceptance, and positive social relationships or friendships between students with disabilities and their classmates (Koster, Nakken, Pijl, & Van Houten, 2009). Sometimes integration and inclusion are words used to convey the same meaning (Mittler, 2012). However, scrutiny reveals they have different meanings according to their values and practices (Polat, 2011). Integration usually indicates only a physical presence of

students with disabilities in a general education classroom for social purposes (Polat, 2011). Inclusion typically indicates more than a physical presence. Polat (2011) stated, “inclusion involves the processes or changing values, attitudes, policies, and practices within the school setting and beyond” (p. 51).

While positive participation is a goal of inclusion, it may not always lead to more friendships and an increase in contact with peers (de Boer et al., 2011). In practice, only a small percentage of students with moderate to severe disabilities participate in inclusion programs (Smith, 2007). Adequate systemic supports and access to resources are key factors in creating positive social and communicative outcomes for partial or full inclusion (De Bortoli et al., 2012). With is in mind, the IEP team must have strong justification for placing a student with disabilities in a separate setting full time.

### **Full Inclusion**

Full inclusion for a student with a disability is the total emersion in the general education setting alongside their peers without disabilities to the greatest extent possible (Alquriani & Gut, 2012; Osgood, 2005; Westling & Fox, 2009). Howe (2011) defined inclusion as “providing services to ensure that all students regardless of their ability can achieve their full potential in an appropriate educational setting” (p. 46). In this model general education directs all student learning and accepts responsibility for all students. All students attend their regularly assigned school and receive instruction from the general education curriculum (Obiaker, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012; Sailor & Roger, 2005). Full inclusion involves physical and social integration into school activities, which are social, educational, and recreational (Spooner et al., 2011). A study by Wilson, Kim, and Michaels (2011) found positive outcomes for students with disabilities in a full inclusion classroom. However, the students participating in the study were all in the mild range of intellectual functioning. None of the participants fell within the moderate

to severe range of intellectual functioning. Research by McLeskey and Waldron (2011) found that some students with disabilities achieved more in full inclusion classrooms, but still other students achieved more with part-time resource services. This indicates that both programs can be successful, with neither being the overall better alternative.

### **Inclusion for Students with Moderate to Severe Disabilities**

Despite the many gains made toward educating students with moderate to severe disabilities, there is still work ahead. A student with disabilities having only a physical presence in the general education classroom is not a satisfactory solution. Tkachyk (2013) affirmed that “modeling and inclusive society should not mean inclusion at all costs, but considering what is best for each student and recognizing that one size does not fit all” (p. 15). Many students with disabilities require systematic and individualized instruction to learn (Downing, 2010) and inclusive practices can assist with this task. Inclusive education provides access to the core academic curriculum for students with moderate to severe disabilities (Dymond, Renzaglia, Gilson, & Slagor, 2007). Often students with moderate to severe disabilities did not receive access to the general education classroom and its curriculum based on their negative perceptions of their potential to learn (Browder, & Spooner, 2006; Downing, 2010). In many situations, students with moderate to severe disabilities do not possess the problem solving skills needed to successfully access the general curriculum, which results in the need to heavily modify their academic programming (Tkachyk, 2013). However, successful inclusive practices are being provided in schools all over the country (Downing, 2010; Idol, 2006), so there remains hope that the trend will continue to be beneficial to all students in general education.

### **Inclusion in Rural Settings**

The challenging and beneficial characteristics describe the current situation of rural special education. The unalterable factors such as teacher characteristics and backgrounds and

the alterable factors such as working conditions contribute to both the challenges and the benefits (Berry, 2011). Many of these characteristics are exclusive to special education. Of the nation's school districts, 40% are located in rural settings (Berry, 2011; Johnson & Strange, 2007). It is important to address teacher shortage and attrition because of its disruption to the curriculum, which negatively affects the educational integrity of services provided to students with disabilities (Berry, 2011). The shortage of special education teachers who are considered highly qualified is claimed to be as high as 35% for rural areas (Brownell et al., 2005; Berry & Gravelle, 2013).

Researchers have discussed the challenges faced by school districts and teachers for many years (Berry & Gravelle, 2013; Collins, 1999; Davis, 2002; Hodge & Krumm, 2009; Provasnik, Kewel-Romani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring, & Xie, 2007). These challenges for all educators include inadequate support, role conflict, role confusion, abundant paperwork, and inadequate resources (Berry & Gravelle, 2013; Billingsley, 2004). Special education teachers in rural districts have additional challenges adding to the adverse affects, which include caseload diversity as well as professional and geographical isolation (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Berry (2012) studied the satisfaction and commitment of rural special education teachers. This study found two of the factors contributing to teacher dissatisfaction are feelings of isolation and lack of professional support. Berry (2012) postulated that the feelings of isolation were a consequence of the lack of professional supports.

The lower tax base of rural areas result in schools and districts operating with reduced funding (Monk, 2007). Less funding and budget restraints challenge all teachers to work with scarcer materials and resources. The rural schools may have difficulty providing the specialized services deemed necessary by a student's IEP (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). It may necessitate

hiring outside agencies for provision of services or consolidating services (Hodge & Krumm, 2009).

Rural areas often contain geographically large school districts and remote locations. This can mean a smaller population of special needs students resulting in smaller caseloads for special education teachers and low numbers of special education teachers. However, it can also result in one special education teacher providing all the services for several schools, or sometimes even the whole district (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Special education teachers in such geographical locations often include social and professional isolation to their list of challenges (Collins, 1999; Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Special education teachers in remote areas typically have caseloads that include many different needs and categories of disabilities (Brownell et al., 2005). They may even provide instruction to students in grades kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> for many different subject areas (Berry & Gravelle, 2013).

Although there are challenges for special education in rural areas, there are also benefits that may serve to counterbalance the situation for educators. Small, rural schools with low attrition rates have attributed their success to the family-like atmosphere, an emphasis on collaboration, maintaining a non-threatening work environment, and all staff members being very familiar with one another (Malloy & Allen, 2007; Huysman, 2008). The work-related benefits of rural employment highlighted in recent research include a higher amount of parent involvement and smaller class size (Berry & Gravelle, 2013; Provasnik et al., 2007). Provasnik et al. (2007) compared satisfaction rates of teachers working in rural areas to those of teachers working in non-rural areas. They found teachers working in rural areas to have higher percentages of satisfaction regarding student behavior, class size, and parent and student support. Rural teachers reported higher frequencies of their students coming to class prepared and parent involvement, as well as lower incidences of behaviors. In other research, rural teachers

acknowledged positive relationships with parents and students and recognize the affirmative way of life distinctive to rural areas (Berry & Gravelle, 2013; Davis, 2002).

One important aspect of successful inclusion involves the staff having joint responsibility for the education of both special education and general education students (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Special education and general education teachers must be involved in higher levels of collaboration toward the implementation of inclusion. Nagle, Hernandez, Embler, McLaughlin, and Doh (2006) examined 13 high schools and found that shared responsibility along with supportive administrators were very important to teacher satisfaction within each school. Working to enhance these positive aspects may provide the appropriate balance necessary to ensure that highly qualified special education teachers and services exist for rural schools, which will pave the way for the successful implementation of inclusion.

### **Implementation of Inclusion**

It is important to plan educational services that will offer a beneficial educational opportunity for all students, including students with significant academic needs. The implementation of inclusion can be a complex and even an elusive process. National statistics concerning the number of students receiving inclusive education state increasing numbers of students receiving services in inclusive placements; however, they do not describe the method of implementation used in these settings (Kilanowski-Press et al., 2010). The extent to which school districts implement inclusive practices is ambiguous at best (Kilanowski-Press et al., 2010; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007; Volonino & Zigmond, 2007), facilitating a growing need for a common definition and understanding of inclusion from which to measure success. Because the practice of inclusion is open and relies heavily on individual perspective (Scruggs et al., 2007), knowledge of relevant instruction pertaining to inclusion and its practices and strategies becomes important for measuring success.



## **Instruction**

Over the years, increasing expectations for students with moderate to severe disabilities necessitated the evolution of instruction. The works of Browder (2011), and Browder et al. (2004) described this change in curricular expectations spanning from the 1970s to 2010. Expectations began in the 1970s with the first public programs. Educators based instruction on a “developmental focus” or the “mental age” of a student and taken from an early childhood curriculum (Browder, 2011, p. 9). In the 1980s, curriculum focused on the student’s level of functioning and concentrating on teaching skills for the community setting. The 1990s brought about inclusion and self-determination, beginning the push for instruction to take place in the general setting. The current expectations of instruction solidified in 2010. Competency-based approaches toward the development of an inclusive curriculum came about in response to the diverse needs of students with disabilities (Roegiers, 2010). Educators now base instruction on extended content standards, which is an adapted version of the general education standards. In this model, the expectation is for students to make adequate yearly progress, holding teachers accountable for student success (Browder, 2011; Browder et al., 2004). Browder (2011) stated that limitations to current expectations lie in not promoting inclusion, functional skills, and self-determination but in planning for individual students. The conclusion drawn from this is that there is currently more of an emphasis on students with disabilities gaining access to the general curriculum than how those students actually benefit from the curriculum. Copeland and Cosbey (2009) connect the past instructional strategies and expectations to the current ones by proposing an instructional strategies approach to support access to the general curriculum. This approach occurs in the general education setting and combines the known effective instructional strategies with the known effective special education strategies.

Research argued that high quality instruction provided for students with disabilities should be more intensive than what general education classrooms offered (Gersten, et al., 2009; Fletcher & Vaugh, 2009; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). The focus on high-priority skills and concepts taught using direct instruction brings intensity when provided within context of smaller group instruction (Gersten et al., 2009; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). Inclusive classrooms have the ability to provide this type of instruction (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Sailor & Roger, 2005). Data from observational research indicates that the majority of instruction in inclusive classrooms for students with disabilities related to academic content (Cameron, Cook, & Tankersley, 2011). Blanco (2009) asserted that inclusion is more about providing diverse and personalized services, rather than providing strictly individualized services. Further, Blanco (2009) calls for a universal design based on the diverse instructional needs of all students, which would also satisfy the needs of specific groups. When individualized instruction is necessary, Florian (2010) suggested that educators use stigma-reducing ways to provide services, which include all learners. “An inclusive curriculum reflects the kind of inclusive societies to which we aspire, equitably distributing opportunities, and eliminating poverty and marginality” (Opertti & Brady, 2011, p. 462).

Cameron and Cook (2013) stated that today’s classroom teachers are challenged with the tasks of determining (a) the appropriate aspects of the general education for each student, (b) when and how to instruct different students in the general curriculum, and (c) when and how to address behavioral, social, and functional goals for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Teachers should be actively involved in the development of an inclusive curriculum, which assist teachers in developing a sense of ownership toward inclusive practice (Opertti & Brady, 2011). It is known that the number of students receiving inclusion services in

general education is increasing, which means the expectations for educators to provide effective instruction for this population is also increasing (Berry, 2010).

### **Inclusive Practices and Strategies**

Even while keeping in mind school reform and restructure, teachers continue to have questions about serving students with disabilities in their classrooms. The challenge for teachers providing inclusive practices for students with moderate to severe disabilities is in determining how best to meet their needs. Students and teachers need supports and strategies for the classroom in order for educational achievement to occur. These supports and strategies may include collaborative planning, self-monitoring, paraprofessional support, peer support, and instructional strategies.

**Collaborative planning.** Collaborative planning occurs when special education teachers and general education teachers come together to determine the most appropriate inclusion options for the student while taking into consideration the IEP, the needed adaptations and accommodations, the needed supports, and progress monitoring (Carter, Parter, Jackson, & Marchant, 2009). The main purpose of collaboration among professionals is to increase the effectiveness and overall quality of education programs (Westling & Fox, 2009). A collaborative team concentrates on student needs and work together to accomplish the goals set as a team (Browder, 2011). Collaboration provides a way to unify the systems of special education and general education (Westling & Fox, 2009), while providing instructional formats that are indicative of shared instructional responsibility (Kilanowski-Press et al., 2010). Collaborative planning offers ways to increase educational performance of students with disabilities by providing structure for addressing performance issues, positive face-to-face interactions, monitoring progress, ways to involve parents and teachers working together, and accountability for the agreed upon responsibilities (Carter et al., 2009).

**Co-teaching.** Co-teaching is a form of collaborative planning between special education and general education so that they work together to educate and support other students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Solis et al., 2012). Designed and implemented as a way for students with disabilities to be included in the general education classroom (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010), co-teaching is the most popular instructional model at the high school level (McLeskey, Waldron, Spooner, & Algozzine, 2014). Teachers address the IEP goals and objectives while simultaneously meeting the academic needs of the other students all within the co-teaching model (Friend et al., 2010).

There are several co-teaching models. The most common model occurs when the general education teacher assumes all instructional responsibility and the special education teacher circulates the room to do performance monitoring (Solis et al., 2012). Another popular model involves splitting the class into smaller groups so that each teacher can provide instruction to the smaller groups. There are also more existing models with teachers providing various levels of instruction and support (Solis et al., 2012).

There are two unique benefits to co-teaching which serve to maximize learning. The first benefit is the increased teacher-student ratio and the second is that the teachers hold critical, but different areas of expertise, which also serve to maximize learning (Friend et al., 2010). A study by Malian and McRae (2010) on perceptions toward co-teaching for the purposes of successful inclusion revealed that teachers in co-teaching situations had higher confidence levels in their classroom abilities and that the experience, overall, is effective.

Despite its noted effectiveness, co-teaching can have challenges including vague demarcation of responsibilities and roles, lack of administrative support, inadequate planning time, and teachers being unfamiliar with the content curriculum (Pugach & Winn, 2011).

**Self-monitoring.** Self-monitoring teaches students to monitor their own behavior and record occurrences of target behaviors (Gilberts, Agran, Hughes, & Wehmeyer, 2001). Teaching self-management skills, such as self-monitoring, can provide a non-stigmatizing way to address inappropriate behavior that is effective and offers strategies to manage difficult behaviors (Ferraioli & Harris, 2011). A study conducted by Gilberts et al. (2001) studied the effects of self-monitoring strategies on the participation of students with severe disabilities receiving services in general education classrooms. The results of their research indicated that self-monitoring represented an effectual educational support to use in the classroom. They taught student participants a series of classroom survival skills associated with school success. Their research was significant because it documented the ability of peers to teach students with severe disabilities to self-monitor their behavior. This research also concluded that when taught using systematic instruction, students with severe disabilities could collect reasonably accurate data that is useful in the general education classroom (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008). Research has recognized self-monitoring as a valuable strategy in working with students who have moderate to severe disabilities in the general education class setting (Carter et al., 2009; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998).

Promoted by Carter, Cushing, and Kennedy (2009), student-directed learning in the general education classroom involved students with disabilities learning self-directed instructional strategies to plan, perform, and monitor a learning task. These types of self-management strategies have advantages because they are easy to teach, can be skill-based, and do not need increased or additional support from teachers and peers (Ferraioli & Harris, 2011). The research of Agran et al. (2005) and Lane, Carter, and Sisco (2012) both determined that students with moderate to severe disabilities are capable of monitoring their own behavior in the general education classroom, consequently enhancing student performance.

**Paraprofessional support.** Paraprofessional support of students with moderate to severe disabilities has played a significant role in regards to inclusion in the general education classrooms. The work of Giangreco, Hurley, and Suter (2009) showed that the United States had the highest percentage of students with disabilities in general education settings and that educators relied heavily on teacher assistance. Many consider paraprofessional support necessary to support inclusive education and practices (Giangreco, 2013). There is often pressure on school faculty and administration for students to have paraprofessional support from parents who want to ensure that their children have sufficient support at school (Downing, 2010; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997).

There is no widely accepted process to determine when it is appropriate to use paraprofessional support (Giangreco, Doyle, & Suter, 2012). Lane et al. (2012) stated that there are occasions, such as when supporting a student with intensive needs, that paraprofessionals are crucial to the education of students with disabilities, as long as the roles of the paraprofessional have clear definitions and support. In their research, they found paraprofessionals to be important for promoting self-determination in the general education classroom. The paraprofessional participant in the study ascribed high levels of importance to the seven self-determination skills of decision-making, choice making, goal setting and attainment, problem solving, self-knowledge and self-awareness (Lane et al., 2012). This study lends itself to the idea that when properly trained and supervised paraprofessionals can appropriately assist in the provision of services in the general education classroom.

Observations and interviews have documented concerns regarding the proximity of the paraprofessional to the student. According to the research of Giangreco and Boer (2005), students with disabilities are in danger of becoming too dependent on the paraprofessional, thus, deterring student performance in the classroom. There are various opinions of the

advantageousness of offering paraprofessional support as a strategy. Teachers often perceive paraprofessional support in the classroom positively, although it may not work positively for the students (Giangreco et al., 2012). Research findings differ as to the effectiveness of paraprofessional support. Proponents of paraprofessional support report that, when trained, they can provide many different social and academic tasks (Bingham, Spooner, & Browder, 2007; Causton-Theoharis, & Malmgren, 2005; McDonnell, Johnson, Polychronis, & Risen, 2002). Research in opposition to paraprofessional support suggest issues with implementing interventions with fidelity (Tompkins, Ratcliff, Jones, Vaden, Hunt, & Sheehan, 2012), and unhelpful behaviors such as offering inaccurate information being more focused on task completion than understanding and supplying answers (Rubie-Davies, Blatchford, Webster, Koutsoubou, & Bassett, 2010).

**Peer support.** Students without disabilities can take on many roles in the general education classroom to facilitate learning for students with disabilities. They can serve as role models, tutors, readers, helpers, and can guide students with disabilities to develop social communication and coordination skills (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Downing, Peckham, & Hardin, 2008). Such peer support interventions are emerging as an effective natural support model to be used by students with disabilities in the general education environment. Peer support can be defined as a peer-mediated strategy consisting of students working together to practice social or academic skills (Hott, Alresheed, & Henry, 2014). Research conducted by Carter, Sisco, Melekoglu, and Kurkowski (2007) studied how changes in peer support configurations differentially affect student outcomes. This study indicates that the amount of time in which the students were engaged in the general curriculum increased along with the second peer involvement. This research suggested alternative support roles to the ones that paraprofessionals might assume with inclusive classrooms. It documented that a second peer support person

increased academic performance and social skills. This study added to and corroborated the existing literature concerning peer support in the general education setting for students with moderate to severe disabilities.

A study conducted by Carter and Kennedy (2006) found that peer support interventions were effective in meaningfully engaging students with severe disabilities in the general curriculum, as well as increasing academic performance and success for the classmates providing peer support. Students with disabilities may be more motivated to work with peers rather than adults (Copeland & Cosbey, 2009). In a study on peer support arrangements with adolescents, it was found that social interaction increased while academic engagement was unchanged (Carter et al., 2011). In contrast, Okilwa and Shelby (2010) found that peer supports and tutoring implemented across subject areas indicated positive academic effects for students in grades 6 through 12. Although research has found the positive effects of peer supports on students with disabilities, unless it is intentionally facilitated few peer interactions are likely to take place on their own (Chung, Carter, Sisco, & Lynn, 2013).

**Instructional strategies.** As students with moderate to severe disabilities are gaining more access to the general education classroom, the emphasis is on accessing appropriate instruction. In order to create better access to the curriculum, research shows that inclusive classroom teachers make regular adjustments in general education classrooms including altered assignments, reduced workload, test accommodations, flexible grouping, homework adjustments, and changing expectations (Zigmond et al., 2009). However, effective instructional strategies that have the potential to help all students learn how to learn are appearing in special education research. Options for instructional strategies used within inclusive practices include systematic instruction (Downing, 2010), differentiated instruction (Harpell & Andrews, 2010), and universal design for learning (UDL) (Alquraini & Gut, 2012).



Systematic instruction is derivative of applied behavior analysis principles and is evidence-based (Spooner, Browder, & Mims, 2011). There is a strong evidence base for using systematic instruction to teach students with moderate to severe disabilities (Browder, Ahlgrim-Dezell, Flowers, & Baker, 2012; Morse & Schuster, 2004; Browder, Wood, Thompson, & Ribuffo, 2014). Some special education experts recommend systematic instruction that refers to direct strategies used to teach new skills and behaviors as well as maintaining and generalizing those behaviors and skills (Downing, 2010). Downing (2010) lists examples of systematic instruction known to be effective instructional practices. These include constant or progressive time delay, task analysis, simultaneous prompting, and least-to-most instructional prompting. Embedded instruction is a way to provide systematic instruction in the general education classroom, allowing the educator to regulate all instructional procedures (Copeland & Cosbey, 2009). Embedded time delay instruction is evidence based and defined as embedding a systematic instructional trial with a general education lesson (Hudson, Browder, & Wood, 2013). Studies have effectively embedded instruction into naturally occurring activities in early childhood special education and inclusive settings (Wolery, Anthony, Caldwell, Snyder, & Morgante, 2002). Similar to embedded instruction, differentiated instruction also uses a systematic approach to learning.

Differentiated instruction postulates that there are diverse learning styles amid random groups of students and teachers should accommodate instructional approaches to meet the varied student needs (Harpell & Andrews, 2010). The instructional characteristics of differentiated inclusion include evidence-based and theory driven curriculum, ongoing assessments, and flexible grouping of students. Direct instruction, cooperative learning, and cognitive strategy instruction are all examples of differentiated instruction (Harpell & Andrews, 2010). The assumption is that creating a variety of supports and options for instruction in a differential

classroom will take care of the distinctive learning needs of the students with disabilities within the classroom (Alberta Education, 2010). Another instructional strategy that has the potential to make a difference for students with moderate to severe disabilities is Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

A research study by Coyne, Pisha, Dalton, Zeph, & Smith, (2012) found Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to be a promising approach for students with moderate to severe disabilities. UDL occurs when planning instruction from the beginning to be conducive to the needs of all students (McLeskey et al., 2014). The foundational aspect of UDL is that by meeting the needs of all students, all students will receive an enriching educational experience (Rose, 2001). Scaffolding is a central feature of UDL. It is a “balance between obtaining and maintaining a child’s engagement, confidence for risk taking, marking relevant information, and demonstrating potential solutions (Coyne et al., 2012, p. 33).

### **Outcomes of Inclusion**

There is evidence that shows students with disabilities as being placed in general education settings for much of the school day (McLeskey et al., 2012; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). Some schools can show evidence of positive outcomes for both students with and without disabilities (Ushomirsky & Hall, 2010), however, there is limited evidence that schools can show positive outcomes concerning students with moderate to severe disabilities (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014). Overall, much of the research leans toward the positive outcomes of inclusion (Alquraini & Gut, 2012), but there are still obstacles and challenges existing, which can bring about negative outcomes and mixed opinions about efficacy (Downing, 2010).

### **Positive Outcomes**

The existing research concerning outcomes for students with moderate to severe disabilities in inclusive placements is mixed, but the majority of the more current research

indicates positive outcomes. Not only are students with disabilities able to meet their IEP goals, the achievement of students with moderate to severe disabilities increase because of interaction with peers without disabilities in an integrated environment (Westling & Fox, 2009). Carter et al. (2009) stated that students with disabilities should be with peers without disabilities so they may receive the positive effects of modeling and tutoring on educational performance. Fisher and Meyer (2002) found that social skills and communication increase for students educated in inclusive settings (Fisher & Meyer, 2002). A study comparing special education classes and general education classes found more social interactions with peers, increased friendships, and less disruptive behavior for students with disabilities when included in general education classes (Salend & Duhaney, 2007). Vianello and Lanfranchi (2011) examined several studies involving Italian students with disabilities and found that social adaptability and school performance were higher than their mental ages would suggest. They call this the “surplus effect” and postulate that the results are due to Italy’s record of 97% of students with disabilities are educated in inclusive classrooms (Vianello & Lanfranchi, 2011, p. 77). Inclusion students with moderate to severe disabilities involved in the research of Fisher and Meyer (2002) scored higher on measures of social competence and had an increase in contact with peers across a broad range of settings and activities. They noted that students spent more time communicating and interacting in the inclusive classroom than they would in the segregated classroom. A study conducted by Logan, et al. (1998) used an alternating treatment design to determine the effect of the type of peer group on happiness behavior on students with severe disabilities. The results indicated that the students with disabilities displayed higher and more stable rates of happiness behaviors while engaging in group activities with non-disabled peers than they did when engaging in group activities with peers with disabilities.

Many studies have shown the benefits of inclusion for both students with disabilities and students without disabilities when integrated (Agran et al., 2005; Agran et al., 2010; Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Carter et al., 2007; Koster et al. 2009). The benefits shown are particularly in the areas of self-esteem, social acceptance, and social skills (Carter et al., 2009; Wolfe & Hall, 2003). Research conducted by Kliewer and Biklen (2001) investigated literacy outcomes for students with moderate to severe disabilities in their natural learning environments. This study found that an inclusive learning environment facilitated student performance in literacy as well as social relationships and adaptive skills.

Research shows the benefits in the performance of students without disabilities paired with students with moderate to severe disabilities such as a greater awareness and appreciation of differences (Carter et al., 2007; Downing, 2010), acquisition of skills associated with teaching others, using assistive technology, and comprehending different ways to learn (Carter & Cushing, 2006; Downing, 2010). Cushing and Kennedy (1997) addressed the issue of students without disabilities falling behind when providing peer support to a student with severe disabilities. They found that general education students who were struggling academically showed letter-grade improvements after providing peer support to a student with a disability. In a more recent study, Carter and Kennedy (2006) reported enhanced academic skill levels for at-risk students who provided support to students with severe disabilities.

### **Negative Outcomes**

The majority of research today seems to support inclusive education, however, there does exist research that discussed the negative effects and obstacles that hinder inclusion. Ayers et al. (2011) discussed their concern for students with severe cognitive disabilities when exposed to a curriculum focused only on academics. They postulated that such students might show positive academic and social outcomes, but have less than positive post school outcomes. Challenges that

result in negative outcomes of inclusion can include the instruction pace, amount of content covered, a reliance on difficult textbooks, frequent testing, which requires high levels of verbal recall, and the recent addition of high stakes testing and its rigorous demands (Scruggs, Mastropieri, Berkley, & Gaetz, 2010).

Through the years, educators have considered the effects of inclusion and the appropriate setting for students with disabilities. For example, in 1997 Vann reported difficulties in attempting a “push-in” inclusionary plan at a primary school (p. 1). In implementing this program, Vann found that in order to make successful gains, some children still had to leave the general classrooms for intensive work in a setting “free of regular classroom distractions” (p. 2). Although the participating students were not disruptive to the general education classroom, their success was limited in the general classroom because of their severe deficits in reading, writing, listening, and auditory processing skills. Vann (1997) also noted that this program caused problems for the self-contained program as well. The students mainstreamed so frequently, that the teacher had difficulty finding uninterrupted blocks of time for student instruction. In this school’s study, they felt that full inclusion is “neither realistic or desirable” (p. 4). Vann’s point was that inclusion should occur individually and based on the “best available placement for each child on an inclusion continuum” (p. 4). This research continues to be significant because there currently remain questions in regards to which setting is the most appropriate and yields the best outcomes for students with significant disabilities (Ayers, et al., 2011; Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2011).

Although there is multitude of research outlining the positive aspects of inclusion for the elementary grades, there continues to be a need for research pertaining to secondary grades. The expectations of NCLB and IDEA on the secondary level poses some challenges leading to middle and high school classrooms being characterized by an increase in the complexity of the

curriculum and the fast-paced instruction (Carter & Kennedy, 2006). Inclusion appears to be more successful in lower grades than higher grades (Tkachyk, 2013), with curriculum factoring heavily in the decline of success rates. The pace and content to be covered, but also the needs for expository reading and comprehension increases as students advance through the grade levels (Berkeley, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2011; Scruggs, Mastropieri, Berkeley, & Graetz, 2010). The peer dynamic also changes in that peer relationships begin to take a prominent role in the lives of adolescents and these roles become more complicated, moving beyond the confines of school (Carter & Kennedy, 2006). Some researchers have reported a decrease in the frequency of communication for these students with their peers at school (De Bortoli et al., 2012). According to the research of De Bortoli et al. (2012), there were more opportunities and increased frequencies of communication and interaction for students at the primary level and lower ones for students at the secondary level. There is agreement among some researchers that while there may be increased communication opportunities for students with disabilities in the general education classrooms, physical placement alone is not enough exposure to result in increased communicative interactions (De Bortoli et al., 2012; Downing, 2010).

As students continue to progress through the educational system, the importance of belonging to a peer group increases. This can cause a decline in the success of inclusive practices over time (Tkachyk, 2013). Students with disabilities tend to have a lower number of friends and are less likely to be part of a group compared to their peers without disabilities (Koster et al., 2009). A Norwegian study by Frostad and Pijl (2007) indicates that 25% of students with disabilities have problems with initiating relationships with peers, but only 8% of their typically developing peers have difficulty. Several studies have agreed that simply providing full inclusion for students with disabilities in a general education setting does not reduce social isolation for those students (Bouck, 2006; Farmer, 2000; Tkachyk, 2013; Vaughn,

Elbaum, & Schumm, 1996). Koster et al. (2009) found that “pupils with special needs are teased, abused, and ignored in mainstream settings, which is in fact harmful to their self-image” (p. 118). Tkachyk (2013) followed this by stating that students with disabilities held a lower social status in the general education classroom than their peers without disabilities. Frostad, Mjaavatn, and Pijl (2011) found the decrease in social status in the classroom to occur over time. This suggests that social isolation can be a constant occurrence (Koster et al., 2009).

In the application of inclusionary practice, there continues to be some factors that hinder its effectiveness and outcomes. There continue to be reports of broad achievement gaps between the achievement of students with disabilities and that of students without disabilities (Chudowsky & Chudowsky, 2009; Harr-Robins, Song, Hurlburt, Pruce, Danielson, Garet, & Taylor, 2012). The achievement gap continues to widen even after the implementation of inclusion for students with disabilities (Klehm, 2014). In a study of 1,201 teachers and 625 principals concerning the Oregon Statewide Assessment, Crawford and Tindal (2006) found that teachers were conscious of the need to bring all students to proficiency, but they did not know how to do it.

There remains considerable inexperience and lack of knowledge that negatively influences the implementation of inclusion. Both special education and general education teachers continue to question how to provide quality instruction mainly because they have not had sufficient experiences with inclusion (Downing, 2010). Teacher training programs continue to separate general education from special education curriculums rather than combining them (Downing, 2010). This may imply to future teachers that the general and special education should be separate in practice as well. Downing (2010) discussed the questions surfacing from teachers about how to teach these students, creating challenges for some students with moderate to severe disabilities who have already have difficulty with maintaining attention and focus, the

heavy emphasis on verbal skills, and the ability to recall information quickly. There have been accusations that students with disabilities have been discarded in classrooms where there is a lack of resources, leaving teachers unprepared to work with these students (Moore, 1996). The willingness of everyone in the school to be supportive of inclusion is necessary for students to experience success. There are extensive changes that must be made to the structure of the classroom, changes in the conceptualization of professional roles, and a continuous need for collaborative teaming (Giangreco et al., 1997; Hunt et al., 2003).

The curriculum contributes to problematic situations that may arise for students in total inclusion settings. Agran, Alper, and Wehmeyer (2002) discussed an intentional narrowing of the curriculum that continues to exist in the present. When combined with high-stakes testing designed to increase accountability, the result that often occurs is the focus of general curriculum on core academic areas only. This excludes many areas of need for students with significant disabilities, such as social competence and functional skill areas. The narrowed-down, content-focused general curriculum can leave little time for instruction to address those areas. The research of Agran et al., (2002), stated that such limitations affect student performance in ways that could create or exacerbate student behaviors. Teachers who are already operating on a limited timeframe in teaching the curriculum would have to take time from teaching to work with students on challenging behaviors in the classroom.

### **Teacher Attitudes and Perceptions Toward Inclusive Practices**

Research indicates that successful inclusion depends greatly on teacher attitudes (de Boer et al., 2011; Forlin, Cedillo, Romero-Contreras, Fletcher, Rodriguez Hernandez, 2010; McHatton & Parker, 2013). Some studies found that teachers have positive attitudes toward inclusion of students with disabilities (Abbott, 2007; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; de Boer et al., 2011;



Marshall, Ralph, & Palmer, 2002), but other research clearly stated reservations about the practice of inclusive education (de Boer et al., 2011; Ring & Travers, 2005).

### **Attitudes**

The attitudes of teachers are very important to student learning. “Attitudes impact how teachers communicate with students as well as how curricular decisions are determined in the classroom” (Logan & Wimer, 2013, p. 3). The context and substance of the classroom is shaped by the teacher’s attitude (Klehm, 2014). There is a rich research base related to teacher perceptions and attitudes toward inclusion. Moore (1996) found that teachers typically display positive attitudes toward inclusion, or they will develop them over time and more experience with inclusion. These results were based on teachers who had training, administrative support, and classroom support regarding inclusion. This lends itself to the assumption that the greater the availability of resources, the greater the acceptance of inclusion. McCray and McHatton (2011) investigated the attitudes of pre-service teachers (elementary and secondary majors) before and after completion of a course on teaching students with disabilities in the general classroom setting. They found an increase in positive attitudes after course completion (McCray & McHatton, 2011). Forlin, Loreman, Sharma, and Earle (2009) studied pre-service teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion, where they discovered that teacher confidence in their ability to teach in inclusive classrooms was the best predictor of teacher attitudes. Teachers have reported variables affecting their ability to provide effective inclusion such as their experiences with inclusive education (de Boer et al., 2011) and class size (Rose, 2001). Teachers with experience with inclusion or inclusive practices tend to have an increase in positive attitudes, especially when they have a smaller class size (de Boer et al., 2011). Sharma, et al. (2008) found that several things affected the attitudes of teachers of students with disabilities including their peers. They found that teachers of younger students support inclusion more than teachers of older

students, teachers viewed students with severe disabilities more positively than students with mild disabilities more positively than students with severe disabilities, and teachers who interact daily with students with disabilities are more positive toward inclusion. Research of students with specific disabilities shows teachers' attitudes are different according to different types of disabilities (de Boer et al., 2011). For example, Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burdin (2002) showed that students with behavioral and emotional difficulties were seen by teachers as causing the most concern. Results from a study by Beacham and Rouse (2012) showed teachers were overall positive toward inclusion, but were less confident about implementing inclusive practices such as needing specialist support, ability-grouping students, and teaching students outside mainstream schools.

It is likely that the ease of implementing supports for included students influence teachers' attitudes (Ferraioli & Harris, 2011). This can affect the consistency and efficacy of the implementation of supports. A study by Biddle (2006) found a significant correlation between negative attitudes toward inclusion and limited use of effective accommodations. As the frequency of using effective accommodations increased, so did the positive attitudes toward inclusion (Biddle, 2006). In a study conducted by Glazzard (2011), teachers saw the main barriers to inclusion as being a lack of funding, resources, and training, as well as parental resistance and an inclusion agenda that does not align with the standards agenda. Glazzard (2011) provided an explanation for why teachers can develop negative attitudes toward inclusion and serving students with disabilities in the classroom.

This obsession with one size fits all results in negative practitioner attitudes.

Practitioners feel threatened by these learners, not because they have negative views on disability, but because these learners threaten their performance data and consequently their identity as good educators. (Glazzard, 2011, p. 62)

Attitudes itself became a barrier in this study because inclusion cannot be successful if educators are not committed to the practice. McHatton and Parker (2013) found that teachers were very aware of the “high-stakes contexts in which they will be evaluated on and were concerned about the impact of inclusion on test scores and school performance” (p. 200). Student performance continues to affect teachers’ pay (McHatton & Parker, 2013).

The challenges and benefits of being a special education teacher can affect teacher job satisfaction, which in turn can affect the quality of education provided to students with disabilities (Berry & Gravelle, 2013; Brownell et al., 2010). Teacher satisfaction contributes to the total school climate and is influential in creating a positive or negative school environment (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). In 2004, McLeskey, Tyler, and Flippen reported that special education teachers leave their jobs at a higher rate than any teacher group. The research of Viel-Ruma et al. (2010) stated that special education teachers leave their positions at an annual rate of 13.2%. Many special educators leave the field entirely, but more than 50% transfers to positions in general education (Plash & Piotrowaki, 2006). Special education teachers have work demands that include specialized behavior management skills, thorough knowledge of many content areas over many grades, additional record keeping and assessments, and additional paperwork (Lee, Patterson, & Vega, 2011). Many of these demands are in addition to the increasing demands of inclusive practices. Viel-Ruma and colleagues (2010) found that special education teachers feel less satisfied with their jobs than general education teachers. This seems to coincide with research conducted in several states showing higher attrition rates for special education teachers than for general education teachers (Katsiyannis, Zhang, & Conroy, 2003). A national survey conducted by Berry and Gravelle (2013) of 55 rural school districts found that most of the teachers were satisfied with the instructional facets of their jobs, but dissatisfied with the non-instructional aspects. Berry (2012) found significant correlations between teachers’ resolve to

remain in their current positions and the amount of support they receive from related service providers, other special education teachers, special education director, and a feeling of shared responsibility between colleagues for the education of students with disabilities. Research has shown that although colleague support is often not available, special educators who could widen their support network to include administrators with general educators reported higher satisfaction levels (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). One study also found an increase in job satisfaction when others within the school environment understood the roles and responsibilities of the special education teachers. The satisfaction increased further with shared responsibilities when providing services to students with disabilities (Berry & Gravelle, 2013).

### **Perceptions**

The perceptions of teachers, both special education and general education, can shape and ultimately determine the success of inclusion and its students. Contreras (2011) found that one achievement barrier for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms are the perceptions held by teachers. When examining teacher perceptions regarding barriers to inclusion, Glazzard (2011) found that inclusive practices ranged from highly inclusive to highly exclusive. This study revealed that some teachers who displayed positive attitudes toward inclusion worked very hard to create effective learners. The opposite proved true for teachers with negative attitudes toward inclusion. Their lack of support “impacted negatively on the school’s commitment to inclusion” (p. 56). Glazzard’s (2011) research indicated the need for educators to “develop a shared understanding of what inclusion looks like” (p. 61).

The perceived benefits of inclusion have influenced its implementation. Research by Nolen, Horn, Ward, & Childers (2011) found that teachers frequently do not implement ideas or programs if they do not feel the idea or program is beneficial to their students. Special education

teachers have reported difficulty in deciding between a practice that benefits a broad range of students and a practice that benefits one student with specific needs (Greenway et al., 2013).

The rejection or concern of teachers seems to directly affect the quality of students' education (Cook & Cameron, 2010). Teacher concern for their students is reflected in student ability to learn and progress rather than in behavior (Cook & Cameron, 2010; Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2000). This means that teachers showed a higher rate of concern for students with cognitive disabilities than for students with behavioral disorders. In a study on inclusive teachers' concern and rejection toward students, Cook and Cameron (2010) found that students with all disability types had higher concern ratings than students without disabilities. They also found that students with learning disabilities and behavioral disorders had higher rejection ratings than students with cognitive disabilities.

### **Teacher-Efficacy**

Social cognitive theory contains a self-efficacy construct developed by Bandura (1994). Bandura (1986; 2012) found that the beliefs an individual holds influence self-efficacy. Torff (2011) postulated that the beliefs of teachers shape the learning of their students. For a teacher, self-efficacy means the expectation that he or she can inspire learning in the classroom.

The research surrounding teacher efficacy as related to inclusion indicated that teachers who view themselves as successful in teaching students with disabilities are more likely to support and implement inclusive practices (Brownell & Pajares, 1999; Cameron & Cook, 2013). Thus it stands to reason that “teachers will be more likely to set goals and hold expectations for their included students in areas where they feel confident in their own ability to help students achieve” (Cameron & Cook, 2013). Studies such as the one conducted by Carter and Kennedy (2006) indicated that teachers emphasize the social benefits of inclusion more than other areas of curriculum. The model of differential expectations (Cameron & Cook, 2013; Cook & Semmel,

2000) holds the position that the external cues of a disability impacts the expectations of teachers. This suggests that teachers have higher expectations for students with mild disabilities because these disabilities are not as apparent externally. The model also suggests that teachers are less likely to see poor performance of students with severe disabilities because of the teachers' own teaching skills or efforts (Cook, 2004). Consequently, teachers may set goals too low for students with severe disabilities (Cook & Cameron, 2010). Woodrock and Vialle (2011) studied the responses and expectations of Australian pre-service primary general education teachers in relation to students with learning disabilities. This study concluded that the teachers' feedback is more positive and sympathy for the student increases as the students' ability level decreases. Along with this, they found an increase in the expectations of future failure toward those students. The approaches teachers use to educate students with disabilities in inclusive settings are significantly related to the expectations and goals they hold for their students, which also affects their behavior toward individual students (Cameron & Cook, 2013).

The self-efficacy of teachers can influence job satisfaction, which also affects the total school environment and the educational integrity of the services they provide. Teachers with increased self-efficacy perceive lower feelings of burnout (Viel-Ruma et al., 2010). Viel-Ruma and colleagues (2010) examined collective efficacy relating to special education teachers. They chose collective efficacy because it focuses on the efforts and beliefs of the whole group. They found that individual teacher self-efficacy affects the collective efficacy, which influences job satisfaction.

### **Summary**

Current literature indicates that students with moderate to severe disabilities are receiving more of their education in inclusive settings or via inclusive practices (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Downing, 2010). Inclusive practices occur on a spectrum, which spans from partial inclusion to

full inclusion. Governmental policy and initiatives require teachers and schools to closely evaluate location of services and focus on educational programming (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Carter et al., 2011). Accountability measures thrust responsibility onto the teachers to ensure students with disabilities demonstrate adequate yearly progress (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Vannest, Mahadevan, Mason, & Temple-Harvey, 2009). As the number of students with disabilities receiving inclusion services rise, so does the number of educators who report reservations concerning their ability to teach inclusive classes (Blecker & Boakes, 2010; Brackenreed, 2011; Fuchs, 2010; Glazzard, 2011). If educators' concerns are not addressed, feelings of resentment and frustration could result (de Boer et al., 2011; Coutsocostas & Alborz, 2010). This not only affects the special education students, but all students involved (Connor et al., 2009; Kozik et al., 2009). Research identified additional training and increased administrative support as the most important needs of educators (Blecker & Boakes, 2010; Brackenreed, 2011; Coutsocostas & Alborz, 2010). Research has also documented significant relationships between teacher attitudes and the level of support they receive (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Solis et al., 2012).

At this time, here is little evidence about what special education teachers feel constitutes successful inclusive practices for students with moderate to severe disabilities. There is a need for additional research to focus on areas including components of successful inclusion, evidence-based practice, effective instructional practices and the self-efficacy of special education teachers. Overall, the research has shown numerous issues with the practice of inclusion for general education teachers, but little research exists concerning experiences and inclusive practices for special education teachers. This proposed study would examine the experiences of special education teachers and seeks to fill the existing gap concerning their experiences, practices, and self-efficacy.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the daily-lived experiences of special education teachers in the phenomenon of inclusive practices for students with moderate to severe disabilities in a rural western North Carolina school district. This investigation was important because students with moderate to severe disabilities continue to present unique challenges to the classroom environment (Downing, 2010). Research has acknowledged teachers reporting both positive and negative attitudes toward inclusion (Berry, 2010; Copeland & Cosby, 2009; Downing, 2010). However, there is little research documenting the experiences of special education teachers and their daily use of inclusive practices. Understanding inclusive practices from the viewpoint of special education teachers is necessary to provide successful educational services for students with disabilities.

This chapter begins by presenting a description of the research design and a rationale for the choice. It describes the participants and setting of the study. It explicates the procedures to collect and analyze data used to test the research questions. In addition, it explains my role in the study as a qualitative researcher. Finally, attention is given to the trustworthiness of the study and ethical consideration of its participants.

### **Design**

A qualitative methodology was chosen for this study because it allowed me to obtain rich detail and insight into participants' experiences. The focus of this qualitative research was on learning the meaning held by participants, rather than any interpretations brought in by myself, as the researcher (Creswell, 2013). This study necessitated qualitative research as it examined a particular population of teachers and their shared experiences as special education teachers by utilizing inclusion practices. Because much is already known about inclusion, a qualitative



design was used to gain new perspectives and information that is more comprehensive. Merriam (2009) stated that researchers using a qualitative design are chiefly concerned with “(a) how people interpret their experiences, (b) how they construct their worlds, and (c) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 23). In order to get to the quintessence of teachers’ experiences, it is important to hear their voices through the contexts of diverse backgrounds, holistic accounts, and numerous unique perspectives (Merriam, 2009).

A transcendental phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study because of the need to examine subjective experiences. Phenomenology is about finding the meaning. Transcendental phenomenology originated with the work of Edmund Husserl, specifically in his book *Logical Investigations* (1901). He asserted that a person could only understand experience through sensory perceptions that lead to conscious awareness. Moustakas (1994) affirmed, “Husserl was concerned with the discovery of meanings and essences in knowledge” (p.27). Moustakas (1994) stated, “Phenomenology seeks meanings from appearances and arrives at essences through intuition and reflection on conscious acts of experience, leading to ideas, concepts, judgments, and understandings” (p. 58). Schutz (1973), (as cited by Moustakas, 1994, p. 44) shared, “that neither common sense nor science can proceed without strict consideration of what is actual in experience.” Creswell (2007) defined phenomenology as “a research strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 13). An essential component of the phenomenological approach encompasses understanding the individual’s point of view (Moustakas, 1994). I wanted to study the daily-lived experiences of special education teachers within the phenomenon of inclusive practices. I wanted to understand the themes and patterns provided by the study’s participants. This made the transcendental phenomenological approach a good fit, in light of the idea that I wanted to gain understanding and meaning from the

situations and experiences of special educators. Moustakas (1994) further illustrated the appropriateness of this approach with his view that perception is the “primary source of knowledge” (p. 52). I aimed to look at perceptions and experiences as a whole, while also viewing it from different angles and voices. I continued to examine participants’ descriptions until I discovered the “essence of the shared experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 53).

Since my goal was to describe special education teachers’ experiences with inclusive practices in rural areas, I used the transcendental phenomenological approach. Transcendental phenomenology looks openly at things naturally presented in the world. Meaning is formed when a phenomenon in our consciousness mixes with nature. Moustakas (1994) explained this in his statement, “what appears in consciousness is an absolute reality while what appears to the world is a product of learning” (p. 27). This specific approach to phenomenology relied on intuition rather than deduction to provide meaning and understanding (Moustakas, 1994) for the readers of this study.

### **Research Questions**

The principal reason behind this research study was to investigate the experiences of special education teachers with inclusive practices for their students with moderate to severe disabilities. A review of the related literature yielded one central question and four sub questions. These questions, which drove this study, sought to discover the overall essence of the lived experiences of these special educators as they use inclusion strategies with their students with moderate to severe instructional needs.

The central research question was:

How do rural special education teachers describe their experiences with inclusive practices for their students with moderate to severe disabilities?

The four sub questions were as follows:

- What are the differences in experiences of inclusive practices between elementary and secondary special education teachers?
- How do special educators describe their experiences with social and academic inclusion?
- What additional resources do special education teachers see as important for them to engage effectively in inclusive instruction?
- What obstacles hinder rural special education teachers from effectively engaging in inclusive instruction?

### **Setting**

The setting of this study was a small rural school district in western North Carolina. For confidentiality reasons, I used the pseudonym Westside School District for the name of the district. I created pseudonyms for all participants as well. This setting was purposely selected because of its relatively high percentage (12%) of students enrolled in special education.

There are nine schools in the district, six elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. The elementary schools range in size from 58 to 400 students. The middle schools have between 260 and 300 students and the high school has approximately 651 students. Westside School District has eight Title I schools, in which at least 40% receive full or reduced price lunch. The school district has four classrooms which are considered separate setting (self-contained) classrooms: two at the elementary level, one at the middle school level, and one at the high school level. These classrooms average between seven to fifteen students each. There are 16 special education teachers in the district, with 14 being female teachers and two being male teachers. Four teachers teach in district (self-contained) classrooms and 12 are resource teachers who teach special education students who spend more than 39% of the day with their non-

disabled peers. The special education teachers in the district carry between 10 and 41 students on their caseload. The district has adopted an inclusion model with a range of partial inclusion to full inclusion, with the amount of time in general education depending on the students' individual needs specified in the Individualized Education Program (IEP). Students participating in full inclusion receive 100% of their instruction, including special education services, in the general education classroom. Partial inclusion encompasses any amount of time less than 100%; with students receiving as much time in the general education class as possible. Students involved in partial inclusion are typically included in the general education classroom for a minimum of 45 minutes and times are increased as deemed appropriate for their individual needs. The idea for this model is that each student receiving special education services will participate in the practice of either partial or full inclusion in the general education classroom.

### **Co-Researchers**

The basis of this phenomenological study was to examine individual experiences by describing the reality perceived by the individual (Creswell, 2013; Heidegger, 2008; Parsons, 2010). This study used a purposeful sampling of 11 special education teachers in the setting of their rural district classroom. There were five elementary school teachers, three middle school teachers, and three high school teachers. Creswell (1998) recommends “long interviews with up to 10 people” for a phenomenological study (p. 65). Also concerning phenomenological studies, Moustakas (1994) cited Trumbull (1993) as interviewing 12-15 participants.

Fraelich (1989) devised the term “co-researcher” when referring to research participants. As the primary researcher, he encouraged his research participants to collaborate with him as a “truthful seeker of knowledge and understanding with regard to the phenomenon” (p. 68). Based on Fraelich's (1989) interpretation, participants in this study were considered and referred to as co-researchers throughout. Being co-researchers allowed the participants to contribute to the

research and findings of this study mutually. Purposeful sampling is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). Moustakas (1994) lists the “requirements for an organized, disciplined, and systematic study” including “constructing a set of criteria to locate appropriate co-researchers” (p. 103). This type of sampling was chosen for this study because each special education teacher currently teaches one or more students classified as moderately and/or severely disabled. Specifically, criterion-sampling strategy of purposeful sampling was used with the qualifying criteria including the following:

- Special education teachers with four or more years of experience in special education instruction.
- Co-researchers must have at least one student receiving special education services with a current IEP, which designates a primary or secondary diagnosis of moderate or severe disability (ID-Mod, ID-Sev).
- Co-researchers must engage in some type of inclusionary instruction or activity (social or academic) with special education students.

In order to avoid bias, the special education director provided a list of those who meet the criteria for the study, listed by number, rather than by name. After I selected the teachers for participation in the study, the special education director gave me the names of the potential educators that I contacted and invited them to participate. All participation in the research study was strictly voluntary and co-researchers maintained the right to remove themselves from the study at any time.

### **Procedures**

After obtaining the approval of the Westside School District superintendent, as well as Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I conducted a pilot study. Kvale (1996) advised that

a pilot study allows for needed revisions prior to the implementation of the study. Marshall and Rossman (2010) stated that a pilot study strengthens research and will “yield a description of initial observations useful to demonstrate not only one’s ability to manage the research but also the strengths of the genre for generating enticing research questions” (p. 96). I conducted a pilot study of the data collection tools with two teachers in order to ensure the credibility of the study. The teachers involved in the pilot study met the criteria of the final study by having: four or more years of experience in special education, at least one student with a primary or secondary diagnosis of moderate to severe disability, and engage in some type of inclusionary instruction or activity with special education students. I did not use the data collected during the pilot study, as part of the final study, and the educators who participated in the pilot study did not participate in the final study.

I contacted the special education director via email providing him with a list of qualifying criteria and requested a list of possible participants. The director selected possible participants who met the qualifying criteria from the district’s employee database. After the director provided a list of the possible participants, I contacted and invited them to participate. Contact information was provided via a list from the office of the special education director. At that point, I sent a recruitment letter or email (see Appendix B) to possible candidates explaining the study and criteria, and requested a response within 5 days for those interested in participating. Before beginning, co-researchers signed a Consent Form (see Appendix C) that described the purpose, overview of the design, risks, and benefits of participation as required by the Institutional Review Board of Liberty University. After obtaining informed consent, I contacted the co-researchers to schedule interviews. I conducted semi-structured interviews in a private, individual setting. In order to obtain a clearer view of each co-researcher’s perspective, I conducted the first interview, then completed an observation of that teacher, then did a second

interview. I analyzed that data before moving on to the next co-researcher. Focusing on the elementary teachers first, I conducted a focus group with those teachers following the individual interviews and observations. For the purpose of this study, elementary teachers were considered to be teachers for grades kindergarten through fifth. After the elementary teachers, I then completed the same cycle with the secondary teachers. Secondary teachers were considered to be teachers for grades six through 12. This study incorporated data collection consisting of semi-structured, open-ended interviews, observations, and focus groups.

### **The Researcher's Role**

In a phenomenological study, the primary instrument of data collection and analysis is the researcher (Creswell, 2007). This creates the potential for research bias. Even if it is intentional or unintentional, the researcher brings his or her predispositions, assumptions, and beliefs to the research (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013). Thus, it becomes imperative for researchers to explain their role as the human instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This includes describing relevant aspects of self, which includes any biases and assumptions, expectations, and experiences in order to qualify the researcher's ability to conduct the research (Greenbank, 2003). Engaging in the *epoche* process was also part of my role as researcher. Moustakas (1994) defined the *epoche* as "a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time" (p. 85).

I have worked as a special education teacher for 10 years, primarily in the elementary setting with students with moderate to severe disabilities. Currently employed as a special education teacher in the Westside School District, I do not serve in a supervisory role over any of the co-researchers in this study. I teach in an elementary separate setting classroom, formerly known as a self-contained classroom. There are 14 students in my classroom, all of who spend

various amounts of time in the general education setting throughout the day. Since part of my role and responsibilities changed recently to take on increased practices of inclusion, I was interested in exploring strategies and daily practices that will assist my students in being successful in the general education classroom. As I continue to work in this setting, I find I am apprehensive toward the guidelines established by NCLB regarding the implementation of inclusion. I feel that inclusion is not always a viable option for some students with low incidence disabilities. I see students and teachers struggle daily in their attempts to acclimate to inclusive practices. While I understand the social benefits of inclusion practices, there is still some apprehension with whether the current structure and practices meet the academic needs of the students. I see this as a concern for many educators as they struggle to meet the demands of the classroom. Although I am aware of the struggles, I have also experienced personal success with inclusion. I have a younger sibling who was educated as a student with moderate disabilities and was successfully included in general education throughout his elementary and secondary school years. Because of my experiences, through my job and my brother, I can clearly see both sides of the inclusion debate. My motivation behind this study was to understand the experiences of special educators who are in situations comparable to my own: A special educator, who is using inclusive practices to create a sense of balance for all students in the classroom.

As discussed in Creswell (2013), phenomenological studies highlight shared experiences between the researcher and participants. Because I did research in the school district where I teach, I was attentive to the possibility that the co-researchers may not be transparent with their statements (Ortlipp, 2008). In order to promote a more clear and honest dialogue, I emphasized confidentiality and compliance with IRB requirements. Additionally, I attempted to enhance creditability by keeping a reflective journal of my own experiences just before and during analysis. By keeping a reflective journal, I was engaging in the *epoche* process. Using a



reflexive journal (see Appendix E) assisted me in making my experiences, feelings, thoughts and opinions transparent and discernable (Ortlipp, 2008) so that I could successfully discover the voice of the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

### **Data Collection**

Creswell (2007) saw data collection as sequences of interrelated activities that yield valuable information to answer the emerging research questions. Through data collection I sought to discover the nature of the participant's experience. The goal of my study was to achieve an in-depth understanding of co-researchers, including their experiences, perspectives, and perceptions. In order to accomplish this and to achieve triangulation, I employed three main forms of data collection, interviews, observations, and focus groups. This methodological triangulation involves using different types of data collection for the purpose of increasing the validity of the study (Patton, 2002). Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory presupposes that people learn by observing others in relation to their experiences, observations, and interactions with others; therefore, the data collection in this study that included interviews, observations, and focus groups ensured that the co-researchers had the opportunity to learn from others, especially through their engagement in the focus groups. Because interviews were the primary form of data collection, I began with an individual interview with each co-researcher, followed by an observation, then a second interview. Observations were performed to obtain data on actual teacher experiences. Focus groups concluded the data collection by offering co-researchers the opportunity to hear the experiences of the co-researchers at the same grade level as themselves. Information from the focus groups clarified any information that needed further explanation. It also provided member checks for accuracy. Data from all three methods produced similar conclusions, then validity has been established (Patton, 2002).

## Interviews

The primary form of data collection for this study was individual in-depth interviews with the co-researchers. According to Creswell (2007), collecting information in a phenomenological study primarily involves in-depth interviews. Moustakas stated, “evidence from phenomenological research is derived from first person reports of life experiences” (p.84). Following Moustakas’ (1994) recommendations for interviews, I engaged in the *epoche* process prior to the interview process. Moustakas recommended that the interviewer create “a climate in which the research participant will feel comfortable and will respond honestly and comprehensively” (p.114). Moustakas stated that the *epoche* involves “setting aside prejudgments and opening the research interview with an unbiased, receptive presence” (p. 180). The purpose of the interviews is to describe the meaning of participants who have all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). For this study, I conducted two semi-structured individual interviews because I wanted to understand the world of the special education teacher with respect to interpreting the meaning of the inclusive practices for students with moderate to severe disabilities.

The individual interviews took place in the co-researcher’s classroom and were conducted face to face. In order to ensure confidentiality, the interviews were private and I used pseudonyms for all participants. I was in charge of the interviews, maintaining two separate interview sessions. I limited the interview sessions to a 20-minute period. The interviews were recorded using an audio digital voice-recording device. I used a Sony digital voice recorder and my iPhone (with AudioNote app) as a backup device. I had a paper-based guide with open-ended questions to follow in order to keep the interview on track as suggested by Seidman (2012). I concluded the individual interviews when information reached its saturation point. Data saturation occurs when the researcher does not see or hear any new information (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). The saturation point was reached when the central research question and sub-questions were answered and the participant had added no new information. The interviews were only one of the data tools, and therefore, did not fully answer the research questions. A combination of the interviews, observations, and focus groups as data collection tools led to a saturation of the subject of special education teachers' experiences with inclusive practices. In order to provide accuracy of each participant's data, member checks were conducted after the data is collected. All transcripts of interviews, observations, and focus groups were sent to all co-researchers for verification of accuracy. To ensure confidentiality, I personally delivered all transcripts to each co-researcher in a sealed envelope.

I developed the interview questions by first examining the proposed research questions for the study and then identifying key constructs in the literature. I had two experts in the field review the interview questions for content validity. The experts both hold doctorate degrees in education, with one employed as a teacher and the other employed as a principal.

The purpose of the two interviews was to extract the experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings related to the phenomenon of inclusive practices of special education teachers who teach students with moderate to severe disabilities. The interview questions were divided into two groups according to content. The first interview focused on the experiences of elementary and secondary teachers. I scheduled an observation with each co-researcher after this interview in order to allow me to get closer to the perspectives of the co-researchers. Then I conducted a second interview to address the attitudes and perceptions of special education teachers. The order of events enabled the co-researcher to bring an ample set of experiences to the study, allowing me to obtain a clearer picture of the essence of those experiences.

The first interview consisted of 12 questions that addressed the experiences of elementary and secondary teachers. The first interview for each co-researcher was conducted prior to his or

her observation and sought to understand the experiences of special education teachers providing inclusive instruction. The following were the first set of open-ended questions regarding inclusive practices with students with moderate to severe disabilities that addressed the concerns in the primary research question as well as the sub-questions:

#### Open-Ended Interview Questions

##### *Experiences of Elementary and Secondary Teachers*

1. Please describe your current teaching position. (Please do not state your job location)
2. How long have you been teaching?
3. Please describe a typical day of teaching.
4. Please describe your educational and training experiences in special education that has led up to this point in your career.
5. How did you become interested in teaching special education?
6. Please discuss your definition of inclusion/inclusive practices for students with moderate to severe disabilities.
7. What is your experience with inclusion/inclusive practices?
8. Does your experience with inclusion/inclusive practices pertain to students with moderate to severe disabilities? How?
9. Please describe the extent to which you as a special education teacher assist in the instruction of students with moderate to severe disabilities in the general education classroom.
10. Please describe your experience with social inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities. What strategies do you see working and/or not working?
11. Please describe your experience with academic inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities. What strategies do you see working and/or not working?

12. Is there anything else you would like to add about inclusion strategies and/or students with disabilities?

Questions one through 12 all addressed the central research question: how do rural special education teachers describe their experiences with inclusive practices for students with moderate to severe disabilities? Specifically, I designed questions one through five to begin a dialogue with the co-researcher. These questions also dealt with teacher preparedness. Research has shown that teachers do not feel sufficiently prepared to meet the needs of students with moderate to severe disabilities in the general education classroom (Friend et al., 2010).

Questions six through nine addressed the sub-question: what are the differences in the experiences of inclusive practices between elementary and secondary teachers? The questions sought to capture the individual experience of the participants. There is documentation of the success of inclusive practices within elementary grades (Allen & Cowdery, 2014), but the amounts of time tend to decrease in secondary schools (Agran et al., 2010). Kennedy and Horn (2004) noted that students with disabilities have extensive support needs that increase the challenges for the student and educators when merged with the intensified challenges of secondary environments.

Questions 10 through 11 addressed the research sub-question: how do special educators describe their experiences of social and academic inclusion? In order to explore the specific attitudes and perceptions of social and academic inclusion, questions ten and eleven were created. A literature review completed by Alquraini and Gut (2012), found positive outcomes in the areas of academic, social, and communication skills for studies with severe disabilities. Social inclusion has long been the main motive for inclusion (de Boer et al., 2011), with academic inclusion often being an afterthought. Now, however, NCLB (2002) has necessitated the emphasis on academic inclusion. Teachers are now held accountable for ensuring students

with disabilities demonstrate adequate progress on standards aligned with the general curriculum (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Educators must venture beyond social skills and focus on academic skills. The research indicates that there are attitudes in favor of both sides of the inclusion debate. There are those who lean strongly toward total immersion in the classroom with a focus on academics (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Downing, 2010; Moore, 1996; Wolfe & Hall, 2003) and there are those who lean toward mainstreaming and pullout options, which emphasize social inclusion (Agran et al., 2002; De Bortoli et al., 2012; Vann, 1997).

The second interview consisted of 10 questions that examined the attitudes and perceptions of special education teachers. Teacher attitudes and perceptions influence the classroom structure and success of the students (Klehm, 2014). Contreras (2011) found that teacher perceptions could become a barrier for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. The following were the second set of open-ended questions regarding inclusive practices with students with moderate to severe disabilities that addressed the primary research questions as well as the sub-questions, focusing on the attitudes and perceptions of teachers:

#### Open-Ended Interview Questions

##### *Attitudes and Perceptions*

1. In what ways do you as a special education teacher meet the needs of the student with moderate to severe disabilities in the general education classroom and/ or the total school environment?
2. In what ways have you observed general education teachers meeting the needs of students with moderate to severe disabilities in the general education classroom and/or the total school environment?

3. Please describe the instructional skills needed to teach students with moderate to severe disabilities in the general education classes.
4. How frequently (daily, 2-3 times a week, once a week, twice a month, once a month, never) would you say that the student(s) with moderate to severe disabilities has presented problematic behavior during inclusionary classroom time?
5. Please give examples of classroom disruptions you have experienced by students with moderate to severe disabilities?
6. How do you see the life and behavior of a student with moderate to severe disabilities changing as they progress through elementary, middle, and high schools?
7. Please describe the factors that are barriers to the successful inclusion of students with moderate to severe disabilities in the general education classroom.
8. Please describe the factors that facilitate the successful inclusion of students with moderate to severe disabilities in the general education classroom.
9. In general, please describe the resources you need as a special educator to make inclusion work for your students with moderate to severe disabilities.
10. Are these resources met? If not, in what ways can the needs be met?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding inclusive instruction or students with moderate to severe disabilities?

Questions one through three addressed the central research question: how do rural special educators describe their experiences with inclusive practices for their students with moderate to severe disabilities? These questions asked educators to describe their experiences and how they meet the needs of their students with moderate to severe disabilities. The questions examined the attitudes and perceptions of educators in regard to how they perceive themselves and others meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Teachers who view themselves as successful in

teaching students with disabilities are more likely to support and implement inclusive practices (Cameron & Cook, 2013). The questions also provided a better understanding of the perceived self-efficacy of special education teachers. Bandura (1994) defined perceived self-efficacy as “people’s beliefs about the capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (p. 2). Viel-Ruma et al. (2010) found that teacher efficacy can influence job satisfaction, educational integrity, and even the total school environment.

Questions four and five addressed how educators describe the behavior of students with moderate to severe disabilities during the implementation of inclusion practices. Teacher concern or rejection seems to have a direct impact on the quality of education for students (Cook & Cameron, 2010). Cook and Cameron (2010) felt that attitudes of teachers were of specific interest because they predict behavioral intentions and those intentions guide the actual behavior. Their study also indicated that teachers showed higher rejection ratings for students with behavioral issues in the classroom. This is consistent with earlier findings revealing higher teacher rejection ratings for students with disabilities (Cook, Cameron, & Tankersley, 2007).

Questions six and seven addressed the sub-question: what obstacles hinder rural special education teachers from effectively engaging in inclusive instruction. It is important to understand what factors contribute to successful inclusion and what factors impede success. Scruggs et al. (2010) documented challenges for the students in inclusion that include instructional pace, amount of content covered, frequent testing, difficult textbooks, and the addition of high stakes testing and its rigorous demands. There are also obstacles to inclusion that affect special educators such as the complex needs of students with disabilities, inadequate systemic supports, and lack of training and experience with students with disabilities (DeBortoli et al., 2012).



Questions eight and nine addressed the sub-question: what additional resources do special education teachers see as important for them to effectively engage in inclusive instruction? These questions investigated the additional resources needed by special educators to facilitate inclusion. Research has shown that teachers who have had professional development, administrative support, and classroom support show an increase in positive attitudes toward inclusion or will develop them over time (Glazzard, 2011; Moore, 1996). From this, one can assume that greater availability of resources results in an increase in positive attitudes toward inclusion. There is also research regarding lack of resources and supports for teachers (Bassette, 2008; Foreland & Chambers, 2011; Glazzard, 2011; Male, 2011, Valeo, 2008). There is a close connection between this and obstacles that hinder inclusive practices. Questions six and seven also examined those obstacles. Research documents the negative perceptions concerning a lack of resource materials (Damore & Murray, 2009; Ernest & Rodgers, 2009; Male, 2011; Solis et al., 2012).

### **Observations**

Observations, along with interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials are the four main sources of data used in qualitative research, (Creswell, 2012). Marshall and Rossman (2010) described observation as “the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study” (p. 140). Observations provide the opportunity to look at participants, interactions, conversations, activities, and physical settings and use the five senses of touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing (Creswell, 2012). After the first interview was completed, I conducted an observation of each co-researcher in their inclusion classroom or during a time when the teachers were utilizing inclusive practices. I took the observer-as-participant stance during the observations. Merriam (2009) stated, “The ideal in qualitative research is to get inside the perspectives of the participants” (p. 125). I took the observer-as-

participant stance because it allowed me to get closer to the perspectives of the co-researchers. In application of this stance, I participated and yet remained detached enough to observe and analyze. It is necessary to stay as detached and objective as possible in order not to “contaminate” the study (Merriam, 2009, p. 127). I took detailed field notes (see Appendix D) to record descriptive notes during the observation. Observations were chosen as a data collection method because I wanted to examine the co-researchers in naturally occurring situations. Observations provided an idea of how the special education teacher assists in the instruction of students with moderate to severe disabilities in the general education classroom. Observational data provided information on the central research question and four sub-questions. This type of data collection allowed me to see how the special education teachers were seeing and living the experiences, they were describing. I was able to compare my observations of elementary and secondary teachers to look at the differences in the experiences they describe. I was able to observe what situations occur that may affect the attitudes of these rural educators as they work with students participating in both social and academic inclusion. I was able to make observations concerning the available and needed resources for teachers to engage effectively in inclusive instruction. Finally, I was able to observe what obstacles exist that hinder special education teachers from engaging effectively in the classroom and compare those observations to the experiences that are described. This observation data was useful to me because it served as a checking system against the subjective nature of the co-researchers’ self-report (Mack, Woodson, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). It told me how accurately the teachers are reporting what they believe and do. In addition, I gained a better understanding of their work environment and how it affects their perceptions and experiences.

Reflective notes on the observations were recorded in a reflective research journal (see Appendix E) after each observation. Ortlipp (2008) stated that reflective journals are a useful

source of data because they can “make the messiness of the research process visible to the researcher who can then make it visible for those who read the research and thus avoid producing, reproducing, and circulating the discourse of research as a neat and linear process” (p. 704). With this in mind, I also used reflective notes on the observations to examine my own experiences, positions, and beliefs pertaining to inclusive educational practices.

### **Focus Groups**

The last piece of data collection was two focus groups. A focus group is “an interview on a topic with a group of people who have knowledge on the topic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 93). Focus groups are more than simply an interviewer asking questions to interviewees in a group setting. “Focus groups interviews rely on the interactions that take place among participants in the group to generate data” (Hatch, 2002, p. 132). Patton (2002) described a strong point of focus groups as “participants get to hear each other’s responses and make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say” (p. 386). The advantages of using focus groups include, (a) provides concentrated data, (b) produces a large amount of data in a short amount of time, (c) seizes the dynamics of group interaction, and (d) participants may feel comfortable and more willing to share (Hatch, 2002). Being in a group of individuals who share commonalities may provide a sense of comfort to the participants that “may lead to more candid and reflective responses than in individual interviews” (Hatch, 2002, p. 132).

The focus group information for this study was used as an additional source of information that will enhance the overall data. The focus group for the elementary teachers was conducted following their interviews, observations, and data analysis. Another focus group was held at a central elementary school conference room so that it would be a comfortable and accessible environment for the elementary teachers. After the elementary teachers, the same cycle was completed with the secondary teachers. One focus group was held in the high school

conference room, so that it would be a comfortable and accessible environment for the secondary teachers. Focus groups sessions were held after school with the allotted timeframe of 45 minutes. I served as the facilitator of each group. My role was to serve as discussion leader but also to encourage the group participants to assume responsibility and leadership roles. Individual interview and observation data shaped the questions for the focus group. The questions were designed to gather additional and more in-depth information on common themes, patterns, and gaps in the data collection of interviews. The focus group was audio recorded and transcribed. I used a Sony digital voice recorder and my iPhone (with Audionote app) as a backup device. I also took notes during the sessions as well as recording reflective notes in a reflective journal after the sessions.

The focus groups provided data to answer the central research question and the sub-questions. I obtained useful information pertaining to the experiences of the special education teachers, how those experiences differ, any changes in attitudes regarding social or academic inclusion, additional resources needed to engage in inclusive instruction, and the obstacles that hinder rural special education teachers in providing inclusion. The focus groups also gave the co-researchers the opportunity to hear and compare the experiences of the other group members.

#### Open-Ended Focus Group Questions

##### *Experiences, Attitudes, and Perceptions*

1. You have discussed challenges in being special education teachers, but you have all worked with students with disabilities for over a year. What motivates you to continue as special education teachers?
2. You have discussed resources in the interviews, so what types of professional development do you feel would better prepare you to implement inclusive practices?

3. What types of inclusive practices do you feel are not being implemented now, but students with moderate to severe disabilities could benefit from in the future? Why do you feel these strategies or practices are not being implemented now? What resources would be needed to accomplish these strategies or practices?
4. Do you feel your students with moderate and severe disabilities would be more successful in social inclusion, academic inclusion, or full inclusion?
5. It has been said that special educators often drive the inclusion program at a school level. Do you agree with this statement? Do you wish you had more of a voice? If you had a bigger role in this area, what would you consider as a top priority?

Question one addressed the central research question: How do rural special education teachers describe their experiences with inclusive practices for their students with moderate to severe disabilities? It examined teacher attitudes, beliefs, and the motivations that help them continue when faced with the challenges of being a special education teacher. Research has shown that special education teachers have the highest rate of attrition of any teacher group (Berry, 2012; McLeskey et al., 2004). Factors found to influence teacher commitment and job satisfaction include working conditions, resources, and supports (Berry, 2012; Berry & Gravelle, 2013; Glazzard, 2011).

Questions two and three addressed additional resources needed by special educators to enable them to support inclusive practices for their students. These questions also revisited the last sub-question that asked - What obstacles hinder special education teachers from engaging in effective inclusive instruction in the classroom? Research has identified a lack of resources as being a barrier for successful inclusion (Bassette, 2008; Foreland & Chambers, 2011; Glazzard, 2011; Male, 2011; Valeo, 2008). For rural areas, limited resources can be significant obstacles because they often operate under budgets that are more restrictive (Berry, 2012; Berry &

Gravelle, 2013; Hodge & Krumm, 2009). Teachers who reported adequate resources and supports have shown positive attitudes (Glazzard, 2011) and higher levels of commitment and job satisfaction (Berry, 2012).

Question four explored special education teachers' attitudes and perceptions of partial and full inclusion. While both options support students with disabilities receiving educational services in the least restrictive environment, attitudes tend to weigh heavily on one side or the other (Alquriani & Gut, 2012). Research reveals positive outcomes and support for partial inclusion (Agran et al., 2002; DeBortoli et al., 20012; Vann, 1997) as well as full inclusion (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Downing, 2010; Moore, 1996; Wolfe & Hall, 2003).

Question five examined the feelings, attitudes, and perceptions of the implementation of inclusive practices. This question also sought to discover special educators' perceptions of their role in the inclusion program. Research shows that teacher attitudes and perceptions influence the success of inclusion (de Boer et al., 2011; Forlin et al., 2010; McHattan & Parker, 2013). This question investigated the perceived self-efficacy of teachers. A study by Cameron and Cook (2013) indicated that teachers who perceive themselves as successful in teaching students with disabilities are more likely to support inclusion.

### **Data Analysis**

During data analysis, I attempted to find logic within data by compiling it into themes and codes. These themes or codes were expressions, phrases, or ideas that are common among the research participants (Kvale, 1996). The procedures for data analysis followed Moustakas' (1994) suggestions for a transcendental phenomenological study. Moustakas (1994) presented Edmund Husserl's idea of transcendental phenomenology as examining things as they are and understanding the essences and meanings through intuition and self-reflection. The researcher

attempts to look at a phenomenon from a fresh viewpoint, while eradicating all assumptions, judgments, and bias (Moustakas, 1994).

Following Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological model, I began the data analysis process by transcribing the data, followed by the *epoche* and phenomenological reduction. First I recorded all interviews and focus groups on a digital voice recorder. I transcribed this information by listening to the dialogue via headphones and transcribing the information verbatim.

The *epoche* is a continuing process that Moustakas (1994) described as a “necessary first step” (p. 34) and an important early step in the data analysis process. He asked researchers to identify and suspend their biases and personal experiences of the phenomenon by bracketing in order not to contaminate the data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). The *epoche* is the process by which the researcher sets aside any biases and investigates the data in a pure state (Moustakas, 1994). The *epoche* “requires a new way of looking at things, a way that requires that we learn to see what stands before our eyes, what we can distinguish and describe” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). I included a description of my experiences with inclusive practices in order to assist in the *epoche* process. I began following the *epoche* process by setting aside my own experiences in order to view the phenomenon as if for the first time (Moustakas, 1994).

The next step recommended by Moustakas (1994) is the process of transcendental-phenomenological reduction. Through phenomenological reduction, “we derive a textural description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon, the constituents that comprise the experience in consciousness, from the vantage point of an open self” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). This process includes bracketing and horizontalization. Moustakas (1994) considered bracketing to be placing the focus of the research in brackets, “everything else is set aside so that the entire research process is rooted solely in the topic and question” (p. 97). My first step was to bracket

out my personal experiences as a special education teacher of students with moderate to severe disabilities, while copiously explicating my history, frustrations, and personal views. Moustakas (1994) referred to this as another step in the *epoche* process, in which the researcher sets aside any biases and prejudgments regarding the phenomenon under investigation.

An aspect within phenomenological reduction is horizontalization, which was the next step in the data analysis process. This means each statement was assigned equal value that represents a portion of meaning (Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) incorporates Husserl's terminology into his own ideas when he stated, "The perceptions that emerge from angles of looking Husserl calls horizons. In the horizontalization of perceptions every perception counts; every perception adds something important to the experience" (p. 53). I began by highlighting any statements, words, or phrases, which address the co-researchers' experiences related to inclusive practices for students with moderate to severe disabilities. These statements were grouped into significant units (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and coded, omitting any statements that were overlapping or repetitive. This left only the horizons, which are described by Moustakas (1994) as being "the textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon" (p. 97). When discussing horizons, Schutz (as cited by Moustakas, 1994, p. 94) stated, "We grasp the others' experience with the same perceptual intention that we grasp a thing or event presented us." From the coded statements, I developed clusters of meaning. To aid in this data analysis procedure, I utilized the ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software program (see Appendix H). This software program employs three aspects of data analysis assistance: creating and preparing a project file, coding the data, and using software to sort and structure the data with the goal of discovering relations and patterns (Friese, 2014). During this process, I engaged in memoing, which means that I wrote reflective notes via the journal mentioned earlier



in chapter three. Memoing (see Appendix E) is a way for the researcher to keep track of the evolving work throughout the research (Creswell, 2012).

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness concentrates on the four areas of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) considered trustworthiness more than just using strategies to maintain validity and credibility. They considered it as the persistent attitude of the researcher to be honest in the representation of the reality of the situation and the individuals studied. In order to address these areas, I employed strategies, which included triangulation of data, member checks, peer debriefing, audits, and reflexive journaling.

### **Credibility**

Credibility is the assessment of whether or not the findings of a study are a credible interpretation of the data taken from the participants' original data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to establish credibility, I used triangulation of data, peer debriefing, and member checks. Triangulation is the process of cross checking the evidence and conclusions by using multiple methods (Creswell, 2007). In order to accomplish triangulation, I used three methods of data collection, interviews, observations, and focus groups. Member checks assist in checking data, analysis categories, conclusions, and interpretations with the research participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking in this study involved co-researchers reviewing the transcripts of their interviews and observations as well as the focus group and the summary of the final results of the study. I further established the credibility of this study by the use of peer debriefing. I had two impartial peers to examine the transcripts, methodology, and final reports (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The peer examiners both hold doctorate degrees and are employed in the field of education, one as a general education teacher and the other as a principal.

## **Transferability**

Transferability is the degree to which research outcomes transfer to other situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Merriam (2009) defined transferability as “the extent to which the findings of one situation can be applied to other situations” (p.223). This was addressed by the use of thick, rich descriptions and analysis. Creswell (2007) proposes construction of intricate, holistic picture, using words and reporting detailed views of the participants’ understanding of the phenomenon. Utilizing thick, rich descriptions of analysis, I detailed the process of data gathering and the findings of the study. I used verbatim transcriptions, providing descriptive phrases and direct quotations, to convey the voice and essence of the co-researchers.

## **Dependability**

Dependability means that the results are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) attributed dependability to “whether one can track the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data” (p. 112). Following Bloomberg and Volpe’s (2012) examples of dependability, I attained dependability through detailed and thorough methods of collecting and analyzing data. I kept a clear and accurate audit trail (see Appendix G) that will document all research steps.

## **Confirmability**

Confirmability is the degree to which the results are shaped by the respondents (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Creswell (2007) stated, “The naturalistic researcher looks for confirmability rather than objectivity in establishing the value of data” (p. 246). Member checks, peer debriefing, and triangulation are three of the methods that ensured dependability and confirmability. Member checking is defined as “a quality control process by which a researcher seeks to improve accuracy, credibility, and validity of what has been recorded during a research interview” (Harper & Cole, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking for this study

occurred when co-researchers reviewed the transcripts and summary of the final study results. Peer debriefing occurs when an impartial peer examines methodology, interpretation, and data analysis of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With this in mind, I had two peers, who are not involved in the research project, to examine the transcripts, methodology, and final reports of the study. Triangulation is defined as “the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection” (Creswell, 2007, p. 252). The three methods of data collection used in this study to create triangulation were interviews, observations, and focus groups. I also engaged in an external audit where I had another researcher, different from the peer mentioned above; review the study for accuracy and validity. Reflexivity is another aspect of confirmability, which was included in this study. As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), I kept a reflexive journal, making regular entries during the research process. I recorded all methodological decisions, my reasoning and logistics, and reflected on the process in terms of my own interests and values.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The reliability and validity of the study is often dependent on the ethics of the researcher. Merriam (2009) stated that ethical issues are likely to result from the collection of data and propagation of findings. The utmost area of concern being for the participants, I made the following ethical provisions. I maintained confidentiality by assigning pseudonyms to the school district, schools, and all participants. Consent forms and confidentiality agreements were provided and discussed. The consent forms included a description of the procedures, benefits, and risks of the study. A consent form is included in Appendix C. The study was voluntary in nature allowing participants to discontinue participation at anything during the course of this study. Pseudonyms were provided to both school and interview locations to further ensure confidentiality. I stored data on password protected flash drives and stored the flash drives, any

supplementary data, transcripts, voice recordings in a locked filing cabinet. I have the only access to this information and the stored data will be securely kept for the length of three years and destroyed thereafter.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of special education teachers regarding inclusive practices with students with moderate to severe disabilities in a rural school district. One central question and four sub-questions guided this study.

The central research question that guided this study was:

How do rural special education teachers describe their experiences with inclusive practices for their students with moderate to severe disabilities?

The four sub-questions were as follows:

- What are the differences in experiences of inclusive practices between elementary and secondary special education teachers?
- How do special educators describe their experiences with social and academic inclusion?
- What additional resources do special education teachers see as important for them to engage effectively in inclusive instruction?
- What obstacles hinder rural special education teachers from effectively engaging in inclusive instruction?

During this research, I discovered the co-researchers' attitudes and perceptions toward inclusive practices as seen through their experiences. Eleven special education teachers participated as co-researchers in interviews, observations, and focus groups. The data analysis went as planned in chapter three. I followed Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological model by transcribing the data, followed by the *epoche* and phenomenological reduction. The following

findings are a synthesized analysis of the co-researchers' experiences using interviews, observations, and focus groups.

This chapter begins with an introduction and summary of the co-researchers who participated in this study. I used pseudonyms in order to protect the identities of the co-researchers. Next, I discussed the themes identified from the data, followed by a discussion of the research question results.

### **Portraits of Co-researchers**

There were 11 co-researchers recruited for this study. There were five elementary school, three middle school, and three high school special education teachers. All co-researchers had four or more years of experience in special education instruction and were currently engaging in some type of inclusionary instruction or activity with special education students. In order to accurately depict co-researchers' voices, I included all quotes verbatim, including any grammatical or spelling errors.

#### **Debi**

This is Debi's 20<sup>th</sup> year in education. She has a Master's degree in special education in severe/profound disabilities. She has spent the past 15 years in special education and has been co-teaching full inclusion classes for kindergarten through second grade for five years. She teaches in the largest elementary school in the district and feels very positive toward their ability to provide inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities. "We have to adjust and adapt our curriculum and our teaching based on what they (the students) need and it's really the most successful thing I've done in special education" (personal communication, June 1, 2015). When discussing outcomes of inclusion she states that none of the students knows who receives special education services and who does not, because all special education takes place in the general education classroom.

### **Linda**

Linda is currently co-teaching fifth grade reading and math for 26 students with intensive needs in the general education classroom. She teaches in a larger elementary school where there are four other special education teachers. This is her 20<sup>th</sup> year of teaching. She began as a paraprofessional in special education before returning to school to get Bachelor's degrees in both special education and general education. She feels that students of all abilities should be educated together as much as possible. "Students with disabilities should always be included every time that there is an opportunity to include them. They get to see how the other kids are, to teach them social skills, and to develop friendships with peers" (personal communication, May 29, 2015).

### **Sally**

Sally provides special education for grades three through five in a larger elementary school. She provides inclusion by co-teaching with three other teachers in the same classroom. Each teacher provides small group instruction for leveled reading and math classes. Sally has 15 years of experience in special education. She has a Master's degree in school administration, National Board certification, and several add-on licenses. Her plans for the future include continuing to work in special education but from an administrative perspective. When discussing her definition of inclusion she stated, "In this setting, all students learn to work together to learn and implement skills that are considered necessary for leading a productive life" (personal communication, June 2, 2015).

### **Janice**

Janice is a special education teacher for kindergarten through fifth grade, providing services at four small schools throughout the week. Her week consists of a lot of traveling as she provides instruction for visually impaired students for two school districts. She taught in general

education for 12 years before moving to special education where she has been for the past 28 years. She holds a Master's degree in education and National Board certification. She will be retiring within the next three years. Although she has a lot of experience in special education, she does not feel that she has adequate experience in inclusion. "I have students who do go to those classes and my job, I feel, is to help them be able to make progress in that curriculum so that they can be included as they possibly can be throughout the school day" (personal communication, June 3, 2015). When asked specifically about her experience with inclusion, she responded:

My opinion of it is that I have seen it working very well in some cases. I've seen it, especially in students that have a lot of behavior problems, disrupt the entire classroom. And so, (laughs) on a good day it is great. When it works it's great. (personal communication, June 3, 2015)

### **Carol**

Carol is another veteran elementary special education teacher with 27 years of experience. She is considering retirement in three years. She has a Master's degree in education, National Board certification, and numerous other educational certifications. She has always been interested in special education due to exposure to it in her personal life. She is the only special education teacher in a small school where they perform inclusive practices in a variety of ways. When asked about her views on inclusion, she stated:

Well, I don't think inclusion necessarily means the environment or I don't really think it is the setting that they are in. I think it's the way they can access the curriculum. They definitely should be part of the curriculum. I think my job is to modify, adjust, whatever to make sure they can access the curriculum. So inclusion, for me, is really not the



setting. It is the way that I work to make sure the kids are part of the curriculum.

(personal communication, June 4, 2015)

### **Kate**

Kate has been teaching special education for 13 years with experience in the middle school and high school settings. She has two Bachelor's degrees in psychology and education, a Master's degree in severe/profound disabilities, and National Board certification. Her description of inclusion is that "every kid, regardless of who that child is or how severe their disability is, that they should be with their same age peers throughout their total school environment" (personal communication, June 5, 2015). She also feels that there are instances where a separate setting for part of the day is appropriate for some students based on individual needs. Kate's students all fell within the moderate to severe range of intellectual disability. She explained that there was not a "typical" day of teaching for her because each of her students receives different amounts of inclusion time throughout the day. She is a proponent of inclusion and describes it as simply "a fact of life and it's what we do" (personal communication, June 5, 2015).

### **Jen**

Jen is at the four-year mark of her special education teaching experience. She has a Bachelor's dual-degree in both general and special education. She is currently working on her Master's degree in special education. She teaches at the middle school level and tends to gravitate toward students on the more severe end of the spectrum. During the focus group, fellow co-researchers commented on her ability to successfully provide inclusion for students with severe disabilities. "What I've always thought inclusion to be was the students with disabilities are in the regular classroom and they are getting instruction from both the regular education teacher and the special education teacher" (personal communication, June 8, 2015).

She would like to see co-teaching situations occurring more for students with disabilities at the secondary level. She expressed some disappointment in the lack of time and materials to provide services that are more inclusive.

### **Cindy**

Cindy is a special education teacher who teaches supplemental reading and math as well as a social studies inclusion class at the middle school level. She has four years of experience and is currently working on her Master's degree in reading education. She enjoys being a special education teacher, but does not consider it as part of her future plans. She views inclusion as "a team-teaching approach where you have to plan together" (personal communication, June 9, 2015). During the interview, she voiced positive opinions toward inclusion as well as frustration toward its implementation. When asked to discuss its implementation, Cindy responded, "It is not ideal in my opinion. I think it could be if we had the chance to sit down together and plan it out" (personal communication, June 9, 2015).

### **Corey**

Corey is a high school special educator with five years of experience. She is one of three special education teachers for the only high school in the district. She began her career in special education as a paraprofessional and returned to school to get her Bachelor's degree. She has certifications in both severe/profound and learning disabilities. She describes her job as the hardest one she has ever had, but the one she has enjoyed the most. She works with students with the most severe disabilities. She explains that not all of her students can participate in full inclusion, but they each participate in general education in different ways. When asked to describe inclusion, she responded, "Well, in the environment that we work in, I think that inclusion just means to their ability, like what we can put them in that they can tolerate" (personal communication, June 10, 2015).

## **Pat**

Pat is a special education teacher at the high school. He has been teaching nine years and also has experience in general education and mental health and behavioral issues. He has a Master's degree in English education and dual certifications in general education and special education. Included in the special education classes that he teaches, he also teaches classes in occupational course of study. This course of study serves as an alternate pathway to a high school diploma for some students with disabilities. He explained that their tasks as teachers have constantly been changing due to a shortage of special education teachers at their school. Their responsibilities and student load have increased, but they are hopeful that it is only temporary. Pat felt that the shortage of staff limits their ability to provide appropriate inclusion their students and has caused some frustration for special education teachers. "So a lot of times inclusion for us has to be working to provide services to students through their regular education teachers" (personal communication, June 11, 2015). He describes his current role with the general education teachers as being "a resource that teachers can turn to when they feel like a student needs help accessing things, especially for students with more moderate to severe disabilities."

## **Alice**

Alice is a high school special education teacher with eight years of experience. She has been involved in various types of inclusion in both the elementary and secondary settings. She has a Master's degree in special education. She works with two other special education teachers at the only high school in the district. The school has found it difficult to fill two open positions for special education teachers. Due to this shortage in staff, the remaining teachers have gotten creative with their inclusion classes. For example, Alice teaches inclusion classes with an online co-teacher. Regarding inclusion, she stated, "It works well when you've got both people

just diving in and both helping the kids and working and not really singling anyone out. It makes a difference” (personal communication, June 12, 2015).

### **Themes**

After data from the interviews, observations, and focus groups were collected and transcribed, meaningful statements were identified. First, I highlighted all words, phrases, and statements that were related to the co-researchers’ experiences with inclusive practices. Then I grouped these statements into significant units and given codes, leaving only the horizons. I developed clusters of meaning from the coded statements and I identified four themes. These themes were (a) A desire for knowledge; (b) Valuing relationships; (c) Making inclusion work; and (d) Working through challenges. The subsequent section provides information on the four emergent themes. Table 1 shows the enumeration of open-code appearance across data sets in relation to the four identified themes.

Table 1

*Enumeration of Open-code Appearance across Data Sets in Relation to Themes*

Open -Codes	Enumeration of open-code appearance across data sets	Themes
Advanced degrees	11	A Desire for Knowledge
Training	16	
Learning from Experience	9	
Learning from Others	12	
Identifying the need for relationships	19	Valuing Relationships
Describing the relationship	10	
Challenges in the relationships	39	
Rationale for inclusion	20	Making Inclusion Work
Socialization	18	
A sense of success	16	
Student challenges	35	Working Through Challenges
Identified frustrations	22	
Understanding toward general education teachers	26	

**A Desire for Knowledge**

The co-researchers' desire for knowledge was the first theme identified. This idea occurred throughout the data with five areas that seemed relevant to this first theme.

**Advanced degrees.** Continuing education appeared to be important to the co-researchers. Of the 11 co-researchers, seven possessed Master's degrees and two were working on obtaining Master's degrees. The two co-researchers who did not have advanced degrees both began in the school system as paraprofessionals and then obtained their Bachelor's degrees.

Four co-researchers had certifications in areas other than special education such as general education, school administration, and additional subject areas.

**Training.** The data showed an overwhelming need for training or professional development on inclusion and its different practices. Cindy remarked:

I agree as far as professional development for inclusion, I've never had any myself. It would be good for everybody to see, okay, here is what it is and here is what you do. I just think it would be a good idea for everybody to have a look at it. Nobody has really told me what inclusion is; it just comes with the territory I guess. It is just assumed that you know. (personal communication, June 9, 2015)

There is also a need for training for both general education and special education teachers. Linda touched on this idea by stating, "Well, having come from both sides (special education and general education) I can see that there is not enough training on differentiation" (personal communication, May 29, 2015). In the focus group, Corey disclosed, "Well I think that the school based trainings, like the instructional coaches and such, don't relate to us, so I think something is needed that relates more to special education" (personal communication, June 10, 2015). Kate also commented on this when she said, "With my group, the more severe, I don't feel like the professional development would be geared toward me, per se, and the awareness needs to be with general education also...from the top down" (personal communication, June 5, 2015).

**Learning from experience.** The co-researchers have all relied on experience as a method of learning. Debi, Linda, and Sally all agreed that they were not taught how to provide inclusion, but they learned from trying it in the classroom. Experimenting with different inclusive methods and practices has added to their experience. Alice has experimented with inclusion by co-teaching with a general education online teacher. Pat stated that most of his

experience was “more on-the-job experience than necessarily...um, I’ve done professional development training in the state special education curriculum, um, but it has mostly been special education on-the-job experience” (personal communication, June 11, 2015).

**Learning from others.** Many of the co-researchers considered learning from others as an integral part of their pursuit of knowledge. Five co-researchers discussed the importance of observing others who provide successful inclusion. For example, Sally stated, “You can talk all day long about what inclusion should look like, but I think training builds professional knowledge, but going and seeing it being done successfully is the best way” (personal communication, June 2, 2015). Alice responded that it would help secondary teachers to “observe a classroom that does it correctly so that we can see how it is supposed to be done” (personal communication, June 12, 2015). Linda and Janice commented that it would also be helpful for someone to come to their classroom and observe them providing inclusion. Janice stated, “We probably do need some people who have been successful at it to give us some advice or tips or workshops at least about it, point us in the right direction” (personal communication, June 3, 2015). During the focus group, Linda restated this idea when she said, “I think having coaching or having someone come in to coach to help us improve our practice is important. That is what I think would help to improve my practices” (personal communication, May 29, 2015). Debi discussed learning from others as occurring simultaneously by everyone teaching in the inclusion classroom.

Um, as we are teaching they (general education teachers) learn to modify for the kids because they watch me modify as I take the lesson and modify it in my group. So I guess it is that we modify and adjust for the kids. Teachers will look at it and say, “Well, ya know, that didn’t go so well, so tomorrow I will do this differently.” So they are learning alongside myself. (personal communication, June 1, 2015)

## **Valuing Relationships**

Perhaps the most prevalent theme throughout the data was the value of the relationships between the special education teachers and the general education teachers. When asked what would be considered successful inclusion, they began by discussing the relationship, indicating that a good relationship serves as a catalyst for success. The elementary teachers cultivated a more positive view of their relationships with co-teachers than the secondary teachers.

**Identifying the need for relationships.** All of the co-researchers recognized the need for establishing good relationships. Debi discussed the importance of good communication between all involved. “We have a lot of data coming in from these inclusion classrooms. We couldn’t do it if we didn’t communicate with the general education and ESL teacher” (personal communication, June 1, 2015). When identifying the need for relationships, Pat discussed the responsibility of the special education teachers when he stated that they “are the ones building the relationships and are a useful part of the inclusion process” (personal communication, June 11, 2015). During the focus group, Debi stated, “if you don’t have that good working relationship and communication, then it is not going to work. If the teachers are not clicking, then the instruction is not clicking and you know that the kids are not learning” (personal communication, June 1, 2015).

**Describing the relationship.** Generally, the relationships were described positively with an emphasis on the responsibilities of both general and special education teachers. When asked to describe her relationships related to inclusion, Carol responded, “I think it is working together as a team and collaborating as a team and talking and, um, developing an element of trust. The team has to trust each other – know that you have their backs” (personal communication, June 4, 2015). Along with developing trust, seven co-researchers mentioned communication as a key to successful inclusion. When asked to describe things that facilitate inclusion, Corey stated, “Um,



I think communication between the teachers and the students and between the special education and general education teachers is important” (personal communication, June 10, 2015). In describing her role from the elementary level, Debi explained, “There is a lot of communication between general education, ESL, and myself and it is definitely a team effort, as you know” (personal communication, June 1, 2015). Pat noted the need for communication, but also the need for special educators to offer support from their area of expertise. “I think a lot of it is being that resource that teachers can turn to when the general education teachers feel like a student needs help accessing things, um, especially with moderate disabilities” (personal communication, June 11, 2015). All 11 co-researchers used the word flexible in their description of successful inclusion and their relationships. Linda recognized the need for flexibility and that she felt it must start with her being flexible.

Now I have people come in and do inclusion with me and I always try to be very welcoming to others and respect their expertise. I try to be open and flexible because I think it is the key to inclusion. (personal communication, May 29, 2015)

Some teachers at the secondary level reported some inflexibility when working with general education teachers. Regarding this, Alice stated:

One thing that even I have gotten better about is being flexible, but some teachers are very rigid and feel like this is their classroom and this is how they are going to do it, and this is the way it is done all the time. But they have to learn that they can’t always do that. (personal communication, June 12, 2015)

It was clear in the interviews that the elementary level provides a type of co-teaching described by Solis et al. (2012) that consists of splitting the class into small groups so that each teacher can provide instruction to the small groups. Those teachers held positive views of inclusion and their

roles. In contrast, secondary teachers and teachers from small schools were more inclined to discuss the challenges associated with inclusion.

**Challenges in the relationships.** All co-researchers expressed respect and understanding for their co-teachers, while some acknowledged the challenges to these relationships. For example, during her interview, Alice stated, “Teachers, overall, are really good, but there are teachers who are just not willing to modify for our kids and even their modifications that they have in their IEP” (personal communication, June 12, 2015). Cindy pointed out that sharing the responsibility with the general education teachers facilitates inclusion. “And having teachers that are willing to work together, that are willing to sit down and plan it out and maybe let go of some of the responsibility to the special education teacher and vise-a-versa” (personal communication, June 9, 2015). Cindy went on to describe her experience in an inclusive classroom when there was a lack of planning and collaboration.

I was in there and I helped them, but I always felt scattered. I really didn’t know what I was going to teach that day. I didn’t really know the activities that were going to go on or didn’t know what was expected of the kids. I was walking around helping as much as possible. It was okay, but we just didn’t have enough time to sit down together, so I really didn’t feel that it was as beneficial as it could have been. (personal communication, June 9, 2015)

During the focus group for the secondary level co-researchers, Corey and Pat both expressed sympathy for the feelings of the general education teachers and how difficult it must be for them to have so many different levels of students in their classrooms. Corey discussed sending her more severe students to general education classrooms. “It’s challenging because you don’t know what class that you send them to that they are going to succeed. We don’t want the teacher to feel like it is a burden to have them in their classroom” (personal communication, June 10,

2015). Pat discussed the role of special education teachers relating more to general education teachers in order to build a strong relationship.

I think that when I have teachers that are cooperative and understanding of the process, it tends to work really, really well and, you know, when teachers feel like you are passing down a bunch of rules to follow, because it is in the IEP and that is the law, it can be less effective. I think a lot of the work in that is building the trusting relationship where they see you as someone they can turn to for help when something is not working. (personal communication, June 11, 2015)

All six of the secondary level co-researchers discussed the lack of education and training as a challenge that affects the relationship between general and special education teachers. In order to combat this challenge, Kate suggested, “There needs to be something more practical, hands-on, and more value oriented. There needs to be something where general education teachers can see the value of inclusion and the value of different approaches” (personal communication, June 5, 2015).

### **Making Inclusion Work**

All of the co-researchers discussed the need for inclusion for all students and that more should be done to facilitate inclusion; however, they seemed to have different ideas about how to include all students. The co-researchers who teach on an elementary level made more statements on including all students both academically and socially. The co-researchers who teach at the secondary level made more statements regarding social inclusion for those students with more moderate to severe disabilities.

**Rationale for inclusion.** The co-researchers all had one thing in common, the desire to include as many students as possible in general education, but also the understanding that

different types of inclusive practices may be needed. Debi provided a good example of this when she said the following:

If we can possibly make inclusion happen for a child, then we have to do all that we can do to make it happen. Pretty much everyone in this building is willing to do that. I am glad we decided to change the structure and try this. You never know until you try.  
(personal communication, June 1, 2015)

Linda also summarized her rationale for inclusion by offering this example:

Well, I believe that all students should be incorporated in the classroom as much as possible. In my intensive classroom this year, I had a couple of students who came from separate classroom environments. They actually fit in very well in the classroom. They were able to go through the same tasks that the other students were doing and were very successful with that, so I do think they should be included” (personal communication, May 29, 2015).

During the focus group, Jen became the first to point out that although she is a proponent of inclusion, it may not be what is appropriate for every child.

I think with my particular group of kids, an inclusive setting may not meet their needs, well not for reading and math. I can’t teach them to divide in a seventh grade classroom when the class is learning something much harder. (personal communication, June 8, 2015)

Socialization then became the next idea identified within the theme of making inclusion work.

**Socialization.** At some point during data collection, all the co-researchers commented on the need for socialization and finding ways of increasing social skills for their students. Seven of the co-researchers teach separate social skills groups to prepare the students with moderate and severe disabilities for the inclusion classroom. Teachers working with students in the fourth to

seventh grades made the majority of these comments. When asked about social inclusion, Pat commented, “It seems that right about when kids hit the fifth or sixth grade that social awareness kicks in” (personal communication, June 11, 2015). When asked specifically about social inclusion, Kate responded:

Social inclusion is actually a little bit more difficult than academic inclusion, in my opinion, because social inclusion, to me, means a student is participating in communication. A lot of it is based in communicative abilities and often kids with severe disabilities struggle in that area. (personal communication, June 5, 2015)

Both Janice and Linda discussed the need to combine social skills training with other functional skills training for students with severe disabilities. Along with the need for social skills training, Janice stated, “I think some of the things, especially functional skills, would often be more beneficial to their quality of life than having them sit in a classroom where they don’t know what’s going on” (personal communication, June 3, 2015). Linda agreed with this and added the following:

I think a lot of times what we teach to our more severe children may or may not have an impact because it does not teach what they really need in life. For example, we don’t teach them how to self-care and things like that. (personal communication, May 29, 2015)

The data indicates that the co-researchers feel that the elementary level successfully implements academic inclusion more, but social inclusion is more appropriate for those students as they progress through middle and high school. It also indicates that both elementary and secondary co-researchers feel that social inclusion is more appropriate for students with severe disabilities.

**A sense of success.** Four of the co-researchers, who provide inclusion in the elementary setting, shared areas of success with inclusive practices. Linda and Kate both shared a sense of

their own success. Linda discussed tag-team teaching with a general education teacher as making her feel like she did “a good job of teaching and providing inclusion.” Kate stated, “I feel like every need the individual kids have, we can meet those needs working with the general education teachers in the school” (personal communication, June 5, 2015). The four co-researchers were eager to share comments concerning student successes. Linda stated that she “felt very pleased with the way they grew on their benchmarks, and their assessments and progress monitoring” (personal communication, May 29, 2015). Carol stated that the teachers are allowing the students more freedom in learning and so she sees the students move from dependence to independence. When asked about progress, Debi commented on a few areas of student success:

I feel they are more self-confident. They don’t feel like they stand out or are different.

They don’t see themselves as different because they are included in the classroom. I’ve watched them go all the way through. They are confident in their skills. Their social skills are better. (personal communication, June 1, 2015)

### **Working Through Challenges**

The fourth theme to emerge from the data involved the challenges faced by special education teachers regarding their attempts to provide inclusion. The co-researchers identified student challenges and their personal frustrations, but also expressed sympathy for the challenges faced by general education teachers.

**Student challenges.** The co-researchers were unanimous in their agreement that their students come to the classroom with their own challenges unique to their situations. They also agreed that the most challenging area for them was behavior. Alice remarked that behavior “makes up 90% of the challenges here at the high school” (personal communication, June 12, 2015). The elementary co-researchers listed general disruptions, defiance, and avoidance

behaviors as challenges to a students participation in inclusion. During the observations, I noted more attention issues from students that encumbered learning. The secondary co-researchers listed behaviors such as shutting down, distracting others, inattention, and lack of attendance. During my observations of the secondary teachers, I observed and noted all four of these challenges. An interesting impression remarked on by all of the co-researchers was that the elementary co-researchers felt that student behaviors are most prevalent at the secondary level. Likewise, the secondary researchers felt that student behaviors are most predominant at the elementary level. For example Pat, a secondary teacher, reported:

I guess that my sense is that a lot of times when students are younger, elementary age, they tend to act out more or big. It tends to be louder or just sometimes a lot more aggressive because they are smaller and they haven't fully developed that self-awareness to look at or be aware of how the kids are reacting or how it might affect them socially or things like that. (personal communication, June 11, 2015)

The co-researchers collectively agreed that student behaviors are more prevalent during inclusion in the general education classroom rather than in the special education classroom. Jen stated, "In the general education classroom, I think it happens more often probably, I would say weekly, and I would say it is because they can't meet the instructional or the academic level and this leads to behavior problem" (personal communication, June 8, 2015). When asked to comment on the possible reasons behind the behavior, Alice replied, "I'm seeing a lot more disabilities that we didn't have a lot of before." Janice responded, " Well a lot of them that I see, I don't know if it is motivation or they just don't have the skills to carry out some of the things asked of them, and so they just act out" (personal communication, June 3, 2015). During the focus group, Pat explained that much of his caseload consists of students with dual diagnoses. "I ended up kind of picking up a lot of students who have mental health diagnoses with behavior issues and

cognitive disabilities” (personal communication, June 11, 2015). Kate agreed with his statement and added that medication errors greatly influence student behavior and their ability to function in a general education class. Jen agreed with Pat and Kate but remarked that she sees the academic demands increase.

I see that it gets harder for them because if they come to middle school and they are not already reading pretty close to grade level, they do not make a whole lot of progress.

That, you know, just kind of sets them up for the rest of their school career, so that it just gets harder and harder for them. (personal communication, June 8, 2015)

**Identified frustrations.** Following student behavior, the co-researchers identified three sources of frustration that hinders their ability to provide successful inclusion. These identified frustrations were time, adequate staffing, and support. All of the co-researchers commented on not having enough time to appropriately do their job. Only three of the co-researchers had planning time in their schedule to adequately plan inclusive lessons or collaborate with general education teachers. Cindy stated, “There are so many kids that need help that I cannot give up my small group instructional time with my students to meet with the regular education teacher to get ready. There is not enough time in the day” (personal communication, June 9, 2015).

Although Pat had a planning time, he still commented on the difficulty of meeting all his classroom responsibilities.

I’m so often called away, either to handle a meeting that I’ve scheduled or to handle issues with students on my caseload, that usually whoever is in the classroom will have to kind of take over. That’s why my plans need to be detailed enough or consistent enough that I can hand them off to someone else who can step in so I can go handle something else at school. (personal communication, June 11, 2015)



A source of frustration was the lack of staff. Eight co-researchers commented on the need for additional staff at a time when school districts are being forced to cut staff. Three co-researchers serve as the only special education teacher for a small school. The co-researchers working at the secondary level revealed that some of the needed positions are available, but there has been a lack of qualified special education teacher applicants. Regarding staff shortage, Pat remarked:

Our students are spread out across courses all over the high school and we don't really have the staffing or the structure set up here to allow us a lot of opportunities to be in the general education classes working with students. (personal communication, June 11, 2015)

Sally voiced her concern for staff shortage in the future when she stated, "Sometimes our resources are met and sometimes they're not, and with funding being cut for assistants next year, it is just going to get more difficult" (personal communication, June 2, 2015).

All the co-researchers most commonly identified frustration toward lack of support from general education teachers or administration. Janice stated, "I think the most or the biggest barrier is when you have a teacher who does not buy into it" (personal communication, June 3, 2015). Debi stated this differently when she said, "Well, what doesn't work is when the teachers do not have good communication. That is a downfall, and if they see us as a threat or something, then it doesn't work" (personal communication, June 1, 2015). Two co-researchers felt there was a lack of awareness and negative perceptions toward inclusion on the part of general education. When asked to comment further on this, Carol explained:

I think the biggest barrier is not understanding kids with disabilities and their needs. I don't think it is that the teachers don't want to understand, I think it's that the teachers don't want to look incompetent. And when you have a kid with disabilities in your classroom, you're going to look incompetent. (personal communication, June 4, 2015)

Jen stated, “I think maybe it is teacher or administrator perception of what inclusion should be or what they think it is going to be...that its going to add extra work or just be too hard” (personal communication, June 8, 2015).

When discussing frustrations during the focus groups, the subject of teacher attrition naturally followed. Four co-researchers are within five years or less of retirement and “due to the nature of things” will probably be retiring. Still other co-researchers anticipated leaving special education in the near future. When discussing her frustrations and job satisfaction, Cindy explained:

I don’t know that I will stay in special education forever. I don’t know if that is what you want to hear or not, but it is the truth. I have found it to be really a challenge to motivate the kids, and not having enough resources, and not having to enough time to try to get their reading and math levels up. I feel like I don’t have enough time to really get them where they need to be. (personal communication, June 15, 2015)

Jen then responded, “I like being able to help them in that way, but I am like her, I don’t want to be here forever” (personal communication, June 15, 2015).

**Understanding toward general education teachers.** Although the co-researchers expressed frustration involving some general education teachers, they were very quick to point out that most of the teachers are very accepting and willing to work with them to provide inclusion. For example, Carol commented:

I think they are quick to figure out what works and what don’t and they truly care about the kids. We work back and forth a lot because their top priority is meeting the needs of the kids and having them access the common core curriculum. (personal communication, June 4, 2015)

They understood that general education teachers are experiencing many of the same frustrations. Alice remarked, “They feel like they do not have enough time to do it all. They have to try to adapt five different tests as well as what they need for the regular education kids that don’t need modifications” (personal communication, June 12, 2015). Carol explained that students with disabilities can be challenging to work with and it is often difficult for general education teachers to ask for help. “I think the teachers need to know that it is okay to feel incompetent. Because you can have a kid that doesn’t really fit the mold and it is okay to ask for help. Some teachers can ask for help a lot easier than other teachers” (personal communication, June 4, 2015).

### **Research Question Results**

The central question directing the purpose of this study was: How do rural special education teachers describe their experiences with inclusive practices for their students with moderate to severe disabilities? This question can be best answered by illuminating the findings of the four sub-questions. This section contains the experiences of special education teachers with inclusive practices as described through the answers to the sub-questions.

The first sub-question asked – What are the differences in experiences of inclusive practices between elementary and secondary special education teachers? This question was designed to address the changes seen by special educators as students advance through school. Overall, the co-researchers saw increases in maturity and awareness. Although they mature, for students with moderate to severe disabilities, the gaps widen, as they get older. The elementary co-researchers acknowledged that students begin to move from dependence to independence, but for some students with severe disabilities, social skills become an issue. Three co-researchers discussed the need to teach functional skills, because with focus on academics “some students aren’t learning the basic skills to make it in the world” (Linda, personal communication, May 29,

2015). Normally, the goals and objectives for these students focus on vocational, functional, and social skills (Cameron & Cook, 2013).

The secondary co-researchers felt that social awareness increases as they get older, but this also reveals the social skills deficits. Social pressures motivate the students and teachers find it difficult to motivate them in other ways. They are still lacking basic skills that lead to acting out in the classroom. Pat stated that the acting out tends to be different, as students get older. The acting out behavior “tends to be quiet, shutting down, and more focused on their peers” (personal communication, June 11, 2015).

The second sub-question asked – How do special educators describe their experiences of social and academic inclusion? This question was created to examine educator’s perceptions of inclusion models, both social and academic, and their experiences with students with significant needs within the different models. This question also sought to determine where educators feel their students fall, or should fall, on the inclusion spectrum. The type and amount of inclusion provided varied from school to school. The co-researchers felt the reasoning behind this to be the amount of available staff, general education teacher support, and funding issues. They remarked that successful inclusion could be provided on a larger scale with more support and funding.

The co-researchers all agreed that social interaction with same-age peers were the most important and beneficial aspect of inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities. These students tend to have difficulty with social skills. Four of the co-researchers stated that it is important to meet students’ social needs before they can adequately learn in an academic inclusion setting. Their statements were consistent with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943) that increasing a student’s sense of belonging allows them to move up the hierarchy, thus increasing his or her motivation to learn. Four of the secondary co-researchers commented that

social inclusion is more appropriate for students with moderate to severe disabilities because those students typically don't have the basic skills needed to function as they progress through the upper grades. Corey, a high school teacher, remarked, "I have students who can't count to 10, so we have to get around what they can do and still let them feel successful and include them" (personal communication, June 10, 2015). In order to accomplish this, Corey offers support through social inclusion to her students with severe disabilities during class changes, lunch, physical education, and clubs and activities. Corey's views were consistent with a study by Tkachyk (2013), who asserted, "inclusive society should not be at all costs, but considering what is best for each student and recognizing that one size does not fit all" (p. 15).

While the elementary co-researchers favored social inclusion for students, they were also able to offer more opportunities for academic inclusion. Co-researchers at larger schools reported that they provided academic inclusion to more students with severe disabilities because they had more staff in the inclusion classrooms. Three co-researchers from the largest elementary school also reported that they had a good support system of administrators and general education teachers. The same co-researchers also noted more student issues arose during social inclusion rather than academic inclusion due to social inclusion occurring more during unstructured times such as lunch and recess.

The third sub-question asked – What additional resources do special education teachers see as important for them to engage effectively in inclusion instruction? It sought to determine whether special education teachers' basic needs are being met. If these needs are being met, do they feel more effective or have higher job satisfaction than teachers who feel that their needs are not met? Four of the eleven co-researchers felt like all their needs were being met. Those co-researchers were from larger schools with more than one special education teacher. Although they currently had support, all four related their fear of a possible staff reduction next year. Sally

stated, “I feel that I have everything I need to do my job right now, but not if funding is cut for assistants next year” (personal communication, June 2, 2015). The co-researchers considered teaching assistants, or paraprofessionals, necessary for providing inclusion. They are like many in the United States who view paraprofessional support as crucial to the education of students with disabilities (Giangreco, 2013; Lane et al., 2012). A cut in funding would mean less staff support in the inclusion classrooms and could mean a reduction in the inclusion provided.

There were seven co-researchers, from small schools and secondary schools, who did not feel their resource needs were being met. The main needs that were reported included more staff, more time, more training, access to instructional materials, and more support from general education. All eleven co-researchers stated the need for more time to prepare and plan. Janice explained, “I think there are resources out there, but most of us don’t have time to go looking for them” (personal communication, June 16, 2015).

The co-researchers who felt that all their needs were being met were more confident in their ability to provide successful inclusion. They reported that they had sufficient staff and materials for their inclusive classrooms and good relationships with their co-teachers. They offered examples of their classroom successes. When Debi was asked what she felt facilitates inclusion, she replied, “I think that the key to inclusion is when your co-teachers have it together and you can tailor your instruction to the data that you see from your assessments and I think we’ve been able to do that” (personal communication, June 1, 2015).

The co-researchers who indicated that their needs were not being met also expressed that they felt they were not providing inclusion successfully. They recognized the value of having good relationships with general education teachers but reported a lack of understanding and support. When asked about providing successful inclusion, Cindy responded, “I feel like I try my best to. I feel like we don’t, but I kind of said the same thing before, but as far as the general

education, I feel like I am just a body there. I don't feel that I am as effective as I could be" (personal communication, June 9, 2015). Five of the co-researchers referred to feelings of inadequacy toward inclusion and low job satisfaction. These co-researchers also indicated that they do not see themselves continuing as a special education teacher.

The fourth sub-question asked – What obstacles hinder special education teachers from engaging in effective instruction in the classroom? There were several challenges identified by the co-researchers that hinder inclusion including the complex needs and behavior of students with disabilities, inadequate support, and lack of funding. The needs and behaviors of students with disabilities can be challenging for special education teachers. As students get older, these needs and behaviors worsen. Alice, Janice, and Kate discussed communication deficits as a significant challenge with Kate pointing out that the majority of students with moderate and severe disabilities have communication issues that can impede their ability to engage in social and classroom activities. A study by De Bortoli et al. (2012) found there were more opportunities and increased frequencies of communication and interaction for students at the elementary level and lower ones for students at the secondary level. The eleven co-researchers unanimously pointed out that all of their students have social skill deficits. The secondary co-researchers commented on the seemingly increasing amount of students with dual diagnoses of mental health and cognitive disabilities as well as the rise in types of disabilities that the teachers are not accustomed to working with. They see more students taking medication for these issues, but they are not taking the medication appropriately. They felt that it gets more difficult to motivate students as they go through the upper grades. These daily struggles often result in behavior issues in the classroom that hinders inclusion.

Inadequate support was an area of concern for the co-researchers. Overall, they were satisfied with the level of support from administration and general education teachers; however,

there are some who are not supportive to special education teachers attempting to provide inclusion. They attributed inadequate support to a “lack of understanding and a fear of the unknown” resulting from general education teachers not having training in special education. During the focus group, Kate expressed some of her frustration when she said, “There seems to be just a lack of awareness of any type of kids with disabilities. I feel like I have to explain and educate and go on and on. It’s frustrating sometimes” (personal communication, June 16, 2015). The co-researchers discussed the difficulty of trying to provide inclusion when general education teachers “do not take ownership in the process” or share ownership of the classroom. Barry and Gravelle (2013) postulated that successful inclusion involves all staff sharing joint responsibility for the education of both special education and general education students. Alice reported that inflexibility of some general education teachers is an obstacle to providing inclusion.

One thing that even I have gotten better about is being flexible, but some teachers are very rigid and feel like this is their classroom and this is how they are going to do it, and this is the way it is done all the time. But they have to learn that they can’t always do that. (personal communication, June 12, 2015)

Two co-researchers commented that they feel they try to encourage teachers to buy into the idea of inclusion so that they will be more willing to modify lesson, co-teach, and collaborate. Debi stated, “They have to be willing to change the way they do things and support students with disabilities or inclusion does not work” (personal communication, June 1, 2015).

The topic of limited funding came up at some point in each interview, indicating that it is a serious concern for each co-researcher. Rural area school districts must often work with limited funding. This means that rural schools may struggle to provide the specialized services regarded as necessary in the student’s IEP (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). During the interviews, the



co-researchers denoted that less funding results in overcrowded classrooms, large student caseloads, lack of training and resources, and not enough available staff.

Sub-question four also investigated whether these challenges intensify for special education teachers based on the rural setting. For Westside School District, the answer is yes. This district has small schools, some with only one special education teacher who may also provide services for more than one school. Linda addressed the overcrowded classrooms, “We have sometimes 20 to 28 students in a small classroom at one time and it gets really crowded really quick” (personal communication, May 29, 2015). Five co-researchers, who worked in small schools, reported large student caseloads and increased paperwork and meetings. Limited funding means that the district may not be able to afford to hire more staff. It also means fewer opportunities for staff development. Co-researchers expressed the need for more professional development or training. They conveyed a need for inclusion training for both special education and general education teachers. Two co-researchers expressed their fear of potential governmental imposed funding cuts explaining that it would mean a reduction in staff that is already sparse. During the focus groups, the co-researchers discussed fears that without adequate staffing there will not be time for inclusion, or time to develop relationships with general education teachers to foster understanding of students with disabilities.

### **Conclusion**

This study’s purpose was defined by the central research question: how do rural special education teachers describe their experiences with inclusive practices for their students with moderate to severe disabilities? I identified four main themes through detailed interviews, observations, and focus groups. These themes were (a) A desire for knowledge; (b) Valuing relationships; (c) Making inclusion work; and (d) Working through challenges. I analyzed the

data using coding, memoing, peer reviews, and member checks. The data analysis answered the central research question and the four sub-questions. .

Generally, the co-researchers discussed their successes with inclusion practices. They saw their students gaining independence, maturity, and awareness as they continue through school. Regarding students with severe disabilities, they reported the need for functional skills and social skills training. Some reported difficulties motivating students, as they get older. The biggest difference between co-researchers was that the elementary co-researchers felt that behavior issues happened on a larger scale on the secondary level and the secondary co-researchers felt behavior issues occurred more at the elementary level. Social inclusion was viewed as appropriate for all students, while academic inclusion was viewed as less appropriate for students with severe disabilities.

The majority of co-researchers did not feel that all of their needs were being met in order to provide successful inclusion. They made statements that indicated they did not feel confident in their ability to provide successful inclusion as well as statements indicating low job satisfaction. Those whose needs were being met made statements that indicated high self-efficacy and job satisfaction. They discussed fewer obstacles to inclusion and were confident in their ability to provide successful inclusion.

The co-researchers identified obstacles in providing inclusion that included the complex needs and behavior of students with disabilities, inadequate support, and lack of funding. Some referred to communication issues and social skill deficits as resulting in challenging behavior. Lack of support was a concern for some co-researchers who would like to see more general education teachers willing to share ownership of the classroom. All the co-researchers valued good relationships with general education, describing them as the most important factor of

successful inclusion. Limited funding was an overall concern because it means not having their needs or the needs of their students met, resulting in the inability to provide adequate inclusion.

This chapter introduced 11 phenomenal co-researchers who chose to share their experiences with inclusive practices as rural special education teachers. Overall, the co-researchers' attitudes and perceptions were positive toward inclusion, given sufficient support and resources. They were motivated by positive relationships with co-workers and by their students' successes. Chapter five discusses these findings, the implications for future research, and the limitations of this study.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of special education teachers regarding inclusive practices with students with moderate and severe disabilities in a rural school district. Understanding the experiences and perceptions of special education teachers will help educators identify how students with moderate to severe disabilities are served with inclusive practices and serve as a guide to implement effective services. It can also be useful as a guide to administrators for improving the daily life and skills of teachers.

The preceding chapter presented an analysis of the responses of each co-researcher. This chapter provides a detailed discussion of the central research question and the sub-questions, along with the implications and recommendations for future research. The central question addressed during this study was: How do rural special education teachers describe their experiences with inclusive practices for their students with moderate to severe disabilities? Also addressed were the following sub-questions: What are the differences in the experiences of inclusion practices between elementary and secondary special education teachers? How do special education teachers describe their experiences with social and academic inclusion? What additional resources do special education teachers see as important for them to engage effectively in inclusive instruction? What obstacles hinder rural special education teachers from effectively engaging in inclusive instruction?

How do rural special education teachers describe their experiences with inclusion practices for their students with moderate to severe disabilities? The data analysis of the co-researchers' experiences yielded four themes that addressed the central question. Those themes

were (a) A desire for knowledge, (b) Valuing relationships, (c) Making inclusion work, and (d) Working through challenges. The four sub-questions addressed these themes as well.

All of the co-researchers expressed a desire for knowledge. Seven co-researchers already possessed advanced degrees in education and two were enrolled in Master's degree programs. They voiced a need for more training for themselves and general education teachers. All of the co-researchers, with two exceptions, had more than 10 years of experience and stated they learned about inclusion from on-the-job experience. They valued learning from others and noted the benefits of observing inclusion provided in successful environments.

Co-researchers valued the importance of relationships between special education and general education teachers. Generally, they viewed relationships positively with co-researchers discussing the need to establish and cultivate partnerships with co-teachers. As with all relationships, there were reported challenges. Those challenges included differentiating for many different levels of students, teachers not understanding inclusion due to lack of education and training, and getting the teachers to share the classroom responsibilities in inclusion classes.

Making inclusion work for all students was a concern for each co-researcher; although most felt that full inclusion was not appropriate for all students. Secondary teachers discussed the increase in difficulty for students at the high school level, especially for students with more severe disabilities. Elementary co-researchers shared a sense of success concerning the amount of students of various abilities that they were able to serve in the general education classroom.

Co-researchers acknowledged the students come to inclusion classrooms with their own challenges. The challenges identified were inattention, shutting down, distracting others, poor attendance, and lack of motivation. They also identified three sources of frustration that included not enough time, inadequate staff, and inadequate support from general education teachers. These frustrations hinder educators' ability to provide inclusion. Co-researchers acknowledged

that although there were frustrations, they realized that the general education teachers share these frustrations. They were considerate of the fact that it can be difficult to include students with moderate to severe disabilities in classroom activities. It is difficult to differentiate for various students while providing instruction on the core curriculum.

What are the differences in experiences of inclusive practices between elementary and secondary special education teachers? Elementary and secondary co-researchers saw differences in the students as they progressed from elementary to secondary schools. They saw increases in maturity and self-awareness, but secondary co-researchers saw the academic gaps widen. Expansive gaps in achievement continue to be reported between the achievement of students with disabilities and that of students without disabilities (Chudowsky & Chudowsky, 2009; Harr-Robins et al., 2012). All of the co-researchers discussed the need for social skills training. The importance of belonging to a social group increases for students as they progress through the educational system. This can cause the success and provision of inclusion to decline over time (Tkachyk, 2013). The inclusive practices of co-researchers are different between the two educational levels because of social needs and behavior. Secondary co-researchers reported more behavioral incidences than elementary; however, each level thought the other must have students with more behavioral issues. Elementary co-researchers cultivated a more positive view of their relationships with general education co-teachers than secondary co-researchers. Elementary co-researchers discussed having more opportunities to practice inclusion, while secondary co-researchers discussed more obstacles and challenges. Secondary co-researchers noted the difficulty in motivating students, as they get older. At the secondary level, inclusion opportunities decrease due to student challenges and behavior, time and staff constraints, and difficulty in getting general education to buy into the idea of inclusion.

How do special educators describe their experiences of social and academic inclusion?

Co-researchers came to the consensus that interaction with the same-age peers was important for students with moderate to severe disabilities. All co-researchers voiced their support for social inclusion, while recognizing that academic inclusion may not be appropriate for all. They recognized that although many special education students make some gains, they are not all able to compete on the level of their peers (Ferraioli & Harris, 2011). Elementary co-researchers were able to provide inclusion that is more academic for their students. They ascribed this to good support from general education teachers and sufficient staff to provide these services. To the contrary, secondary co-researchers attributed a decrease in the provision of inclusion to less support from general education teachers due to time and student ratio constrictions, lack of staff, and increases in student challenges and difficulty in the curriculum.

What additional resources do special education teachers see as important for them to engage effectively in inclusion instruction? The majority of co-researchers felt that not all of their resource needs were met. The common needs reported were more preparation and planning time, more training, access to instructional materials, and more general education support. This is consistent with a study by Glazzard (2011) that found that teachers saw lack of funding, resources, and training as the main barriers to inclusion. These co-researchers reported a lack of understanding and support from general education co-workers, low confidence in the ability to provide inclusion, low confidence in overall effectiveness, and low job satisfaction.

What obstacles hinder special education teachers from engaging in effective instruction in the classroom? The complex needs and behavior of students with disabilities, inadequate support, and limited funding were the most common obstacles identified by co-researchers. The complex needs and behaviors of students included, communication impairments, social skill deficits, decreased motivation, and increasing types and severities of mental health and cognitive

disabilities. Secondary co-researchers conveyed that these struggles often increase in severity as they progress through middle and high school. The experiences of the co-researchers in this study are consistent with current research that inclusion is more successful in lower grades than higher grades (Berkeley et al., 2011; Scruggs et al., 2010; Tkachyk, 2013).

Inadequate supports and limited funding were concerns for all co-researchers. Generally, they were satisfied with the level of support from administration and general education teachers, but there were still concerns about those who were not supportive to the inclusion process. Secondary co-researchers voiced more concerns toward inadequate support from administrators and general education teachers than elementary. They attributed inadequate support to lack of training on disabilities and special education. Limited funding contributed to this also because it results in overcrowded classrooms, large student caseloads, less training and resources, and not enough available staff.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The learning theories that guided this study included Maslow's Hierarchy of Need, Bandura's social learning theory, and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. These learning theories fit this study's purpose of examining the experiences of special education teachers engaging in inclusive practices, because they focus on motivation, self-efficacy, and perceptions.

#### **Hierarchy of Needs**

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was a natural fit because this study examined the experiences of special education teachers while exploring needs and motivation. Maslow's (1943) theory postulates that before learning can occur, basic human needs must be met. This was relevant to statements made by co-researchers concerning student learning and skills. Although they saw gains, co-researchers also saw student needs that impede their learning. For



students with moderate to severe disabilities, these needs increase in severity as students mature. Co-researchers noted deficits in functional and social skills. This fits into Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs because students cannot move up the hierarchical ladder to self-actualization and optimal learning until their basic needs are met. Social skills deficits may prevent a student from achieving a sense of belonging and decreasing the motivation to learn. Secondary co-researchers discussed their frustration that it was difficult to motivate students, as they get older. The responses of co-researchers indicate that as some students mature they become more socially aware, but lack the skills to respond socially. This can result in decreased motivation and acting out behavior. Some co-researchers reported that they provide social skills training in an effort to provide confidence and alleviate behavior. The results imply a need for social skills training and an emphasis on social inclusion.

Maslow's (1943) theory pertains to educators as well. If educators are not getting their basic needs met, they will not be motivated to move toward self-actualization. The majority of co-researchers expressed worries that funding would be cut for next school year. This would leave them without crucial resources needed to perform their jobs, jeopardizing the safety and security level of the hierarchy. Basic needs and resources were prevalent in the co-researchers' thoughts indicating that Maslow's theory is correct and those educators will have difficulty reaching the next level.

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

Bandura's (1994) social cognitive theory states that learning occurs through observation, modeling, and motivation. Co-researchers discussed learning from others as important to both educators and students. Some co-researchers discussed the need to observe the provision of successful inclusion in order to emulate the practice. Co-researchers also applied this thinking to

their students by expounding on the need for more social opportunities for their students with moderate to severe disabilities to learn from observation.

The self-efficacy construct of Bandura's social cognitive theory is a person's expectation of his or her ability to complete a task or goal (Bandura, 1994). Co-researchers who reported that their needs were met expressed higher self-efficacy than those who felt their needs were not met. The co-researchers with high self-efficacy were proud of their accomplishments with inclusion and felt they were affecting positive learning. They also discussed positive relationships with co-workers and sufficient support. Co-researchers who felt their needs were not being met expressed feelings of inadequacy toward providing inclusion. The same co-researchers also expressed low job satisfaction, indicating they do not see themselves continuing as special education teachers.

### **Zone of Proximal Development**

Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development is considered the distance between the actual developmental level and the potential developmental level with assistance from an adult or a stronger peer. It is relevant to this study in a couple of ways. As co-researchers discussed the need for socialization for their students, they commented on the importance of peers to model and teach new skills. Shabani, et al. (2010) used ZPD to explain the collaboration between general education and teachers with specialized training, such as special education teachers. They take into account the social aspects of teacher learning when applying ZPD to professional development. They held that teachers benefit from the support of colleagues. In the case of special education and general education teacher collaboration, each educator is an expert in his or her field. The teachers would learn from each other, subsequently raising their ZPDs. While explaining their co-teaching relationships, the co-researchers who described co-teaching situations also described aspects of ZPD. They viewed the special education teachers as the

assisting adult in small group or one-on-one situations. In these situations, the results indicated that its success depends on the relationship between the special education teacher and the general education teacher.

### **Empirical Implications**

Special education has made many gains for students with disabilities since its inception. The idea of including all students in general education has been appearing in research for over 20 years. Currently, the focus has been on how to serve all students, both with and without disabilities, effectively (Cameron & Cook, 2013). While there is an abundance of information on general education teachers and their experiences with inclusion, there was a lack of information on the experiences of special education teachers and their experience with the various inclusive practices on the spectrum.

### **Student Outcomes**

There are many research studies discussing the positive outcomes of inclusion for elementary grades, but not as much research exists concerning secondary grades. In one study regarding inclusion at the elementary level, Tkachyk (2013) stated that inclusion appears to be more successful in lower grades than higher grades. The increasing difficulty of the curriculum contributed greatly to the decline of success rates in upper grades. The results of this study agreed with the past research with the idea that inclusion appears to be more successful at the elementary level. Tkachyk (2013) asserted that curriculum influences the decrease in success rates after elementary school. The results of this study differ from those of Tkachyk (2013) because the co-researchers indicated that social skill deficits and communication impairments influence student success rates more than the curriculum. Co-researchers voiced the desire to include as many students with disabilities as possible in the general education classroom, but recognized that it is not always possible. Recent studies suggested that the fast pace and difficult

content, extensive reading and comprehension demands, the increasing complexities of peer relationships, and decreased communication often causes the decline in success rates (Berkeley et al., 2012; Carter & Kennedy, 2006; De Bortoli et al., 2012; Scruggs et al., 2010). In these Studies, such challenges were considered common for students with disabilities. The co-researchers' views differed from past research because they felt social skill deficits, with communication impairments named second, were the most common challenge for students with moderate to severe disabilities in the general education classroom. They discussed these deficits as resulting in behavior issues in the classroom. Such behavior issues, seen more as students get older, serve as a barrier to inclusion for the entire class.

The co-researchers in this study indicate that communication decreases, partly because of impairments, but mainly due to social skill deficits increasing, as they get older. This differs with three studies in current research that found that communication and social skills increase for students educated in inclusive settings (Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Salend & Duhaney, 2007; Vianello & Lanfranchi, 2011). This departure from the literature can be attributed to the fact that the three studies focused on students with mild to moderate disabilities. In this study, the co-researchers' answers were based on their experiences with students with moderate to severe disabilities. In the case of students with significant disabilities, the co-researchers saw decreases in communication and increases in social skill deficits. This is in agreement with some researchers who found that while there may be an increase in communication opportunities for students with disabilities, physical placement does not replace communicative interaction (De Bortoli et al., 2012; Downing, 2010). This implies a need for consistent provision of social skills training and opportunities for students with moderate to severe disabilities as they progress through the grades. Some co-researchers discussed that they were currently providing social skill instruction. Keeping in line with Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, the co-researchers

realize they must work with students on social skills before students can begin to be successful in academics.

### **Practical Implications**

The results of this study revealed implications applicable for administrators and educators. First, I provided implications for administrators including ideas about listening and support, providing education and training, and providing planning time. Then, implications for special educators are provided including, being flexible, learning from others, and sharing responsibilities.

#### **Implications for Administrators**

The challenges and benefits of being a special education teacher can affect job satisfaction (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Special education teachers have been reported to leave their jobs at a higher rate than any teacher group (McLeskey et al., 2004). More recently, the research of Viel-Ruma et al. (2010) reported that teachers leave special education at a rate of 13.2% and feel less satisfied with their jobs than general education teachers. Berry (2012) found a significant correlation between special education teachers staying in their current positions and the amount of support received from administrators, other special education teachers, and a feeling of shared responsibilities between colleagues. This is concurrent with the responses of rural special education teachers in this study. Seven co-researchers did not view their needs and resources as being met. The main needs reported were more staff, more time, more training, more instructional materials, and more support from general education. These co-researchers expressed feelings that they were not providing effective inclusion and feelings of low satisfaction. Of the 11 co-researchers, two conveyed they did not see a future for themselves in special education. These figures suggest the potential for increased staff attrition within the next

five years. For these reasons, the following recommendations were made for administrators or school decision makers.

**Listen and support.** The co-researchers were generally satisfied with the level of support received from administrators. They felt they were supported when problems developed. The co-researchers expressed understanding that although they were trying to meet everyone's needs, often administrators' hands were tied. It is suggested that administrators support teachers through listening, showing an interest, providing realistic expectations, highlighting successes, and validating concerns.

**Provide education and training.** Many of the co-researchers were concerned about a lack of understanding and support from general education teachers. They viewed the cause of this to be a lack of education and training on disabilities and special education. They were concerned with ways they could facilitate good relationships with general education teachers and finding ways to help them become invested in inclusion. It is suggested that administrators should model collaborative relationships, provide joint training for general education and special education teachers, and empower both groups of teachers to make joint decisions. The co-researchers were very interested in increasing education and training for themselves as well. Lifelong learning is evident in all the co-researchers lives, demonstrated by their pursuit of advanced degrees and certifications.

**Provide time for planning.** During data collection, all of the co-researchers mentioned the need for more time for preparation and planning. Some mentioned this as a frustration for them within the profession and some mentioned this as a barrier to providing successful inclusion. Time allotted for preparation and planning between general education teachers and special education teachers would promote successful inclusion. In order to accomplish this, it is

suggested that administrators provide some flexibility in daily or weekly schedules to facilitate collaboration between special education and general education teachers.

### **Implications for Educators**

In addition to implications for administrators, the results yielded implications relevant to both special educators and general educators. These implications included flexibility, learning from others, and sharing responsibility.

**Be flexible.** All co-researchers commented on the importance of being flexible for both students and co-workers. Being flexible, to them, meant a willingness to change lessons and plans as needed and make or change accommodations as needed. It meant not expecting that all students learn the same. It also meant providing a welcoming environment for everyone in the classroom including general education teachers, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and students both with and without disabilities.

**Learn from others.** The co-researchers commented on the importance of learning from others. They felt that successful inclusion should involve modeling skills for the teachers. For example, during her interview, Alice stated it would help to “observe a classroom that does it correctly so that we can see how it is supposed to be done” (personal communication, June 12, 2015). They felt that learning from others would be the best way to improve their practice. They also felt that co-teaching relationships provided opportunities for special education and general education teachers to learn from each other. It is suggested that administrators provide learning opportunities for educators to observe others providing successful inclusion and to encourage and facilitate co-teaching relationships.

**Share responsibility.** Several co-researchers discussed their idea of successful inclusion involving sharing classroom responsibilities with the general education teachers. Three co-researchers stated this was the “key to inclusion”. They conveyed that it was important not to

be afraid of new ideas and to be willing to try new things and “find out what works”. With this in mind, it is suggested that administrators encourage parity among special education and general education teachers by recognizing both teachers as the classroom teacher in the school community. This will allow the school community to view both teachers as equals.

### **Limitations**

The limitations are prospective uncontrollable weaknesses of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). This was a qualitative study with a sample size restricted to one rural North Carolina school district. It focused on only the experiences of the special education teachers. This means the experiences of the co-researchers will not necessarily be transferable beyond the scope of this study. The co-researchers were Caucasian and included only one male co-researcher. This means a diverse sampling population according to race and gender was not a representative population. This was a result of the demographics of the purposefully selected school district. In order to establish transferability, this study should be duplicated in various settings including those with a more diverse ethnic population and socioeconomic make up.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study’s focus was on the experiences of special education teachers who engaged in inclusion or inclusive practices. Based on the findings of this study, the subsequent recommendations for future research are proposed:

This study found that co-researchers had concerns toward social skill deficits hindering inclusion, and they had positive perceptions of the benefits of social skills training. Future research should be completed to focus on the effects of social skills training for students on inclusion outcomes. Additionally, follow up research should focus on special education teachers’ experiences following district-wide social skills training for students with moderate to severe disabilities.



The study noted that there was a significant difference in inclusion at the elementary level and inclusion at the secondary level. Inclusion appears to be more successful at the elementary level than it is at the secondary level. Future study conducted at the secondary level should investigate the extent of inclusion at the high school level and ways to involve the staff in the implementation.

This study found that special education teachers valued relationships with general education teachers, but commonly identified lack of support from general education as a frustration and barrier to inclusion. A qualitative study should be conducted to gather information on different types of training or staff development for special education and general education teachers on special education topics in order to discover which types have the most positive affect on teacher attitudes toward inclusion. This type of study would give school administrators information on how to facilitate productive relationships between general education and special education teachers to ensure the provision of effective inclusion.

### **Conclusion**

Students with moderate to severe disabilities are receiving more of their education in inclusive settings or through inclusive practices (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Downing, 2010). The idea is apparent that all students with disabilities should be included with their peers without disabilities to the greatest extent possible. The substantial needs of students with moderate to severe disabilities can add stress for already overloaded teachers (Downing, 2010). The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of rural special education teachers engaging in inclusive practices with students with moderate to severe disabilities. The idea was to examine attitudes, perceptions, motivation, and teacher efficacy regarding inclusion. This was accomplished through interviews, observations, and focus groups. The 11 co-researchers graciously shared their experiences and classrooms, and from this, I identified common themes.

The distinctive findings of this study added to the existing literature because it focused on a distinct group of teachers – special educators who provide inclusion services to students with moderate to severe disabilities in a rural school district. The definition of inclusion will continue to evolve as more is learned about how to serve students with significant disabilities successfully in the general education classroom.

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**APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER**

Dear Shannon,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases are attached to your approval email.

Your IRB-approved, stamped consent form is also attached. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

[Redacted Signature]

*Professor, IRB Chair*  
**Counseling**

**(434) 592-4054**

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## APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Date: February 13, 2015

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

As a graduate student in the education department at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate degree. The purpose of my research is to examine how rural special education teachers describe their experiences with inclusive practices for their students with moderate to severe disabilities. The director of special education provided me with an anonymous list of all special education teachers who met the following criteria:

- four or more years experience in special education
- have at least one student with a primary or secondary diagnosis of moderate or severe disability
- engage in some type of inclusionary instruction or activity with special education students.,

I am writing to invite you to participate in my study. If you agree to participate you will be asked to engage in two short interview sessions, be observed during a time when you provide inclusive instruction, and be part of a focus group. It should take approximately three hours for you to complete the procedures listed. Once you have agreed to participate you will be assigned a pseudonym making your participation completely confidential, and no personal, identifying information ever will be required or included in any report.

A consent document is attached to this letter. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document and return it to me via the attached self-addressed, stamped envelope. Your signature indicates that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the study.

If you have any questions about the study or the nature of your participation, please do not hesitate to contact me at [sbanders@yanceync.net](mailto:sbanders@yanceync.net).

Sincerely,

Shannon Anders

Liberty University Graduate Student

The Liberty University Institutional  
Review Board has approved  
this document for use from  
May 27, 2015 to May 26, 2016  
Protocol # 2216.052715

## CONSENT FORM

### A Phenomenological Study to Examine Special Education Teachers' Experiences of Inclusive Practices for Students with Moderate to Severe Disabilities

Shannon B. Anders  
Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to participate in a research study to investigate the experiences of special education teachers regarding inclusive education practices for students with moderate to severe disabilities. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a special education teacher using inclusive practices with students diagnosed with moderate to severe disabilities. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions before agreeing to be in this study.

This study is being conducted by Shannon Anders, doctoral candidate with the School of Education at Liberty University.

#### Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to answer the following primary research question as well as the other sub-questions that frame the investigation:

How do rural special education teachers describe their experiences with inclusive practices for their students with moderate to severe disabilities?

The four sub-questions are as follows:

- What are the differences in experiences of inclusive practices between elementary and secondary special education teachers?
- How do special educators describe their experiences with social and academic inclusion?
- What additional resources do special education teachers see as important for them to effectively engage in inclusive instruction?
- What obstacles hinder rural special education teachers from effectively engaging in inclusive instruction?

If you agree to this to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in two one-on-one interviews. These interviews will last not more than one hour and take place in your classroom or another agreed upon location. All interviews will be audio-recorded in order to transcribe the interviews accurately.
2. Allow the primary researcher to observe in your classroom for 45 minutes during one of your inclusion classes or during a time when you are engaging in inclusive practices.
3. Participate in a focus group with other participants teaching at the same level. The focus group will take place in the school media center. It is expected to last no more than one hour. The focus group will be audio recorded for accuracy and transcription.

The Liberty University Institutional  
Review Board has approved  
this document for use from  
May 27, 2015 to May 26, 2016  
Protocol # 2216.052715

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**

This study has minimal risks, which are no more than you would encounter in everyday life.

Teachers who will participate in a collaborative discussion through the focus group may learn additional information relating to special education teachers' experiences with the inclusion of students with moderate to severe disabilities that could prompt change in their own practice as a special educator.

In addition, this may promote changes in best practices in the field of special education.

**Compensation:**

You will not receive payment or any type of compensation for participation in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. For this study, pseudonyms will be used for the district, schools, and all participants. All transcripts and voice recordings will be secured in a lock box, and all digital records will be kept under password protection. Only the researcher will have access to the transcriptions. All files will be securely stored for three years after the publication of the results and then destroyed by shredding paper documents and permanently erasing electronic files. There are limits to confidentiality in that the researcher cannot assure that all participants of the focus group will maintain the participants' confidentiality and privacy.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or your county school district. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships. You may notify the primary researcher of your intent to withdraw at any time and any data collected prior to your withdrawal will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in the findings or final report.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The primary researcher conducting this study is Shannon Anders. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at 828-678-0216 or sanders@liberty.edu. Gail Collins, Ed.D, is advising this study with Liberty University and can be reached via email at gcollins2@liberty.edu.

The Liberty University Institutional  
Review Board has approved  
this document for use from  
May 27, 2015 to May 26, 2016  
Protocol # 2216.052715

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ By checking this box, I understand and agree to be audio-recorded during the interview and/or the focus group.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D: OBSERVATION FIELD NOTES

### Observation Field Notes Sample

Name: Linda (Elementary 5<sup>th</sup> grade)

Date and Time: 5/29/15 8:10am-8:55am

Subject being observed: Reading/Language Arts

Observations of events and behaviors: Leveled Language Arts group with three groups. Group 1 had 9 students, group 2 had 7 students and group 3 had 7 students (2 with ID-Moderate and 2 with ID-Mild, 1 with ID-Sev). There were 8 minority students. There was 1 special education teacher, 1 ESL teacher, and 1 general education teacher. Group 1 read a story and answered teacher's questions. This group worked on getting the deeper meaning of the story (how the author uses figurative language to paint a picture). The (sp.ed) teacher (of the group with students with mod-sev. disabilities) circulated within the group and provided the same amount of attention to all students (maybe not to draw attention to one particular student?).

Comments/Summary:

- The students (with disabilities) seem to be fitting in well with their peers during work time.
- At one point, the students in group 2 were talking about a student with moderate disabilities and the teacher seemed to catch this and redirected all the students back to their work. The student did not seem to notice.
- Students with disabilities are good at watching others for social clues.
- Worked on independent work for 10 minutes then Sped teacher came back to work with them on the answers.
- Gen. ed teacher read story and asked questions. (Much higher level than the student with severe disabilities receives in self-contained) fifth grade skills taught at a lower level (appears between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade)
- ID-moderate students have preferential seating in each group.
- Teachers working well together. They had a theme, but each worked w/a different group, with a different lesson plan for each group.
- Groups are timed for 15 minutes each. The groups move so fast, it almost seems to limit negative behaviors. There is a lot to get done in each group and a lot for students to think about.

## Observation Field Notes Sample Continued

Name: Linda (Elementary 5<sup>th</sup> grade)

Date and Time: 8/29/15    8:10am-8:55am

Subject being observed: Reading/Language Arts

Comments/Summary:

- Small behaviors (such as wandering & loud talking) occurred during group rotation. Teacher quickly redirected and encouraged them on to next task. She stated they were working on smoother transitions between groups.
- Special and general education teachers both used lots of reinforcement/praise to keep students on track.
- Teachers kept students aware of the time, letting them know when she was almost finished, how much longer left in the activity, and how much longer left in the class.

## **APPENDIX E: REFLEXIVE JOURNAL**

June 4, 2015

Continued reflections on the interviews and analysis:

After completing several initial interviews with the elementary co-researchers, I seem to see myself improving in my abilities as interviewer. In the beginning, I was worried about the reliability of the statements of some of the co-researchers given my relationship with them (working at the same school). These co-researchers know my views on inclusion and I was afraid that would affect their answers. I think it was the right choice to interview a couple of other co-researchers, with whom I do not work closely, first so I could get an idea of their answers. The pilot test, I think, was also very helpful in this area.

I realized that some of the co-researchers seemed nervous about their answers in the beginning also. I discovered this first during the pilot test. I decided to review the consent form with them right before the interviews (some had signed the consent and returned earlier). I found that once we went over that no one would have access to the recordings but myself they seemed to be more at ease. I think this helped them to be more open in their responses.

My next challenge has been analyzing the data after each interview so that I may move on to the next. I am definitely seeing the benefits to this now, although I was not so sure in the beginning. The hurdle continues to be coding. Atlas.ti is helping with the management of the information, but it has been difficult (and time consuming) to figure out what to code the information. It seems that I keep having too many different codes. When I finish all the interviews I plan to go back and do a second cycle of coding (and maybe even a third) in order to combine and reduce the amount of codes.

## APPENDIX F: MEMOING

June 16, 2015

Continued reflections on the focus groups:

After conducting both focus groups, I realized that in both groups the co-researchers seemed more open and responsive. During the individual interviews, some of the co-researchers seemed hesitant at times in their responses, especially if he or she felt those responses could be viewed as negative. I found that when the co-researchers were together they seemed more comfortable expressing frustrations. I heard more statements that began with “I’ll be honest with you....” Some co-researchers, who did not comment on job retention during the interview, made statements that they would probably not stay in special education. Mostly the secondary teachers made these types of statements. Statements like these make me reflect back on my beginning curiosity as to whether the inclusion process tends to break down as students with moderate to severe disabilities progress through the grades. Inclusion and inclusionary practices seem more difficult at the secondary level. My thoughts on this include: increases in behavior, size of school, and general education teacher cooperation.

The teachers from the largest elementary school (over 400 students) were far more confident in their ability to provide successful inclusion and practices. This tapers off as I interviewed middle school and high school teachers. The cooperation and relationships of the general education teachers also seem to decrease. There could be a couple of reasons for this. The largest schools have more special education teachers and more general education teachers per grade, so there is probably more support. The smaller schools have only one special education for that school (or covering several schools) as well as only one general education teacher per grade.

I was so interested in the fact that many of the co-researchers do separate social skills groups to prepare the students with moderate to severe students for the inclusion classroom. I wonder if exploring this more could help with some of the behavior issues that seem to be hindering some of the students in the higher grades? This could also help with teacher satisfaction and self-efficacy. During the focus groups, the co-researchers were able to share some ideas about things like this. They stated that it would help them to be able to have group meetings like this throughout the school year. I would not be surprised if this was a suggestion they made for next school year.



## APPENDIX G: AUDIT TRAIL

### Audit Trail

Date	Task	Reflective Notes
January 26, 2015	Received district approval for research from superintendent	
April 28, 2015	Successfully defended proposal	Received great feedback. Received approval to submit IRB application.
May 27, 2015	Received IRB approval	Process took about 2 ½ weeks with one set of small revisions.
May 28, 2015	Contacted special education coordinator (via email) for possible candidates. Sent out recruitment letters to candidates.	Very happy to have received the list of candidates within one hour so that I could get started contacting possible candidates.
May 28, 2015- May 29, 2015	Conducted pilot study	This gave me good feedback and practice for the interview process.
May 29, 2015	Scheduled interviews and observations with co-researchers	I received fast responses from those interested. Two co-researchers brought me their signed consent forms on the 28 <sup>th</sup> and asked to schedule interviews. They are eager to schedule because testing is coming up.
May 29, 2015 – June 12, 2015	Conducted interviews and observations with co-researchers. Transcribed interviews and analyzed data before moving on to next co-researcher. Scheduled focus group times at interviews.	This process seemed to go smoothly even though we were in a time crunch to complete initial interviews and observations before school ends.
June 15, 2015 – June 16, 2015	Conducted focus groups	The focus groups went well. I noticed that all co-researchers were more vocal about their feelings in the focus groups than the individual interviews.
June 18, 2015 – June 18, 2015	Transcribed focus groups and analyzed data.	Atlas.ti is great at managing and organizing data.
June 22, 2015 – July 3, 2015	Data analysis	Completed second cycle of coding and seeing emerging

		themes.
July 3, 2015 – July 29, 2015	Data analysis and data findings.	Completed First Draft of chapters four and five
July 29-August 30, 2015	Revising and refining Chapters 1-5	Received lots of great feedback from committee and RC.
September 1, 2015 – September 23, 2015	Revising and refining	Preparing for Defense scheduled October 1, 2015.

## APPENDIX H: EXAMPLES OF CODED TRANSCRIPTS USING ATLAS.TI

you have to loop it – things like that. You do that with academics, you start small and you move up and it is very important to have a support system in place, especially because general education teachers don't get a lot of special education classes and they don't understand a lot of strategies, so they need a support person. And that's me. I get to go in and out and I am very approachable. I think the special education teacher has to be very approachable to these teachers so that they know if they have a problem or if they don't understand something that they can come and talk and know that there's an atmosphere of trust, so you work together. These teachers try everything in their power to help their kids succeed. It doesn't matter if they are the top students or not.

Me: How frequently (daily, 2-3 times a week, once a week, twice a month, once a month, never) would you say that the student(s) with moderate to severe disabilities has presented problematic behavior during inclusionary classroom time?

Carol: Here, I think the support systems are in place and you hardly see any behaviors. Um, if you do, they are taught self-regulation behaviors and they know immediately, especially the kids with autism, if they're feeling frustrated, and that happens a lot. You know there are certain behaviors that they can do to calm themselves. They may need to go to a quiet place. Most all the teachers allow them to use their supports that are in place.

Me: Please give examples of classroom disruptions you have experienced by students with moderate to severe disabilities?

Carol: I think more just the frustration at not being able to access the curriculum. And maybe you know, crying maybe, putting their heads down, you know, avoidance behaviors. Those are the main behaviors.

Me: How do you see the life and behavior of a student with moderate to severe disabilities changing as they progress through elementary, middle, and high schools?

Carol: Well, I see they move from dependence to independence. This depends on their teachers allowing them to do things and maybe teaching them maybe things that they didn't think they could do, but finding a way for them to do them. I think our main goal is to teach them to be independent and eventually be able to make it on their own. And the only way you can do this is with supports. You can't just throw a kid with a disability

relationships  
expectations  
positive attitude  
strategies  
understanding  
challenges  
outcomes  
goals

that has led up to this point in your career.

Carol: Okay, um, I have a B.A. in elementary education, K through six. I have a Master's Degree in K through twelve. I have LD (Learning Disability) certification K through 12. I have moderate to severe disabilities k through 12, Preschool (Birth to K) certification, and then I have... let's see... I have one more. I can't think of it, but then I have National Board Certification, and early childhood generalist. I think that's it.

Me: That is a lot. That's good.

Carol: I'll have to look at my certificates.

Me: How did you become interested in teaching special education?

Carol: I have always been interested in special education. I, myself, have cerebral palsy, that I have always dealt with and I have a son who has some special needs as well.

Me: Please discuss your definition of inclusion/inclusive practices for students with moderate to severe disabilities.

Carol: Well, I don't think inclusion necessarily means the environment or I don't really think it is the setting that they are in. I think it's the way that they can access the curriculum. They definitely should be a part of the curriculum. And I think my job is to modify, adjust, whatever, to make sure they can access the curriculum. So inclusion, for me, is really not the setting. It is the way that I work to make sure that these kids are part of the curriculum.

Me: What is your experience with inclusion/inclusive practices?

Carol: Well, I've done inclusion a lot. My idea, or what you see, for me, of inclusion may be since I am in the small school, I can run in and out, I can do small groups either in or out of the classroom. I can provide the teacher with a way to change instruction. For example, some kid may need visuals instead along with instructions, so I work with the teacher to provide that and collaborate ways maybe they can present their lessons a little bit differently. I may model that lesson. I also use kids as teachers and once they learn a lesson

Life long learners  
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strategies