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Students with Disabilities: Perspectives of Regular Education Teachers of Increased Inclusion

Mindy D. Myers Mrs.
East Tennessee State University

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Students with Disabilities: Perspectives of Regular Education Teachers of Increased Inclusion

A dissertation presented to the faculty of the department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership by Mindy Myers December 2013

Keywords: Special Education, Inclusion
ABSTRACT

Students with Disabilities: Perspectives of Regular Education Teachers of Increased Inclusion

by

Mindy Myers

The purpose of this study was to explore regular education teachers’ perceptions of inclusion. The participants of this study were K-12 regular education teachers located in Tennessee’s First region. Specifically, this research explored (1) perceptions of the impact of inclusion on instructional strategies, (2) perceived level of preparedness to effectively teach students with disabilities (3) professional development needs of regular education teachers instructing students with disabilities, and (4) collaborative relationships between regular and special educators. The data sources analyzed consisted of a survey design using a 4-point Likert scale. Each research question had a corresponding null hypothesis. Each research question was analyzed using a single sample t-test with mid-point of the scale (2.5) as the value representing neutrality. All data were analyzed at the .05 level of significance. Findings indicated that participants’ overall perceptions of inclusion were significantly positive.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family. To my husband Shannon Myers, I appreciate your support and patience throughout this process. Your continual encouragement helped me complete this journey. I cannot forget our little dog Sam who was constant company throughout the writing process.

I also dedicate this to my parents Kenneth and Wilma Rice. Without your influence in my life I would not be where I am today.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

America’s public education system has gone through many reforms and changes since its creation. The goal of each and every change is to improve the educational outcomes of all. The quality of education for students with disabilities has improved since the passing of Public Law 94-142 in 1975 that guaranteed a free, appropriate public education to all students with disabilities. Since that time the law has been reauthorized many times, changing the design of special education programs throughout public schools (Zigmond, Kloo, & Volonino, 2009). Since 1975 regular education classrooms have gradually became more inclusive for students with disabilities. The support for full inclusion becomes stronger with each reauthorization of PL 94-142. The passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 placed pressure on school systems to hold teachers accountable for the achievement students with disabilities. In 2004 the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) was passed stating, “students with disabilities were to have access to the regular curriculum and to the regular education teachers fully qualified to teach that curriculum” (Zigmond et al., 2009, p. 194). Requiring students with disabilities to have access to the regular curriculum has placed more students with disabilities in the regular classroom, leaving regular education teachers responsible for providing specialized instruction to meet individual needs.

Academic ability among students differs leaving teachers with the challenge of meeting educational needs of diverse groups of students. With initiatives such as
Common Core, educators have been called upon to increase expectations and adopt more rigorous curriculum regardless of student ability (Conley, 2011). Regular education teachers have adapted and increased their skills and knowledge to meet the educational needs of students with varying abilities. The diversity of student ability has changed instruction. The practice of delivering the same lesson to all students is no longer acceptable due to the varying individual needs within a given classroom (Broderick, Mehta-Parekh, & Reid, 2011). The inclusion of students with disabilities along with a more rigorous curriculum has increased the need for regular education teachers to embrace and understand students with disabilities.

Inclusion is not a new concept to educators; however, the focus placed on closing the achievement gap between regular education and special education peers has become stronger. States such as Rhode Island that have experienced success in closing the achievement gap among students with disabilities have credited the increase of achievement to inclusive strategies and differentiated instruction (Hawkins, 2007). Inclusion has been researched extensively over the years. Many studies have concluded that teacher attitudes, collaboration with special education teachers, and effective instructional strategies are instrumental to the success of inclusion (Kalahimah 2010; Orr 2003; Pudlas, 2009).
Statement of the Problem

Educational Acts such as the Individual with Disabilities Education Act and No Child Left Behind placed more emphasis on including students with disabilities in the regular education setting. More pressure is being placed on school systems to have all students performing on grade level. As a result, regular education teachers have become responsible for implementing Individualized Education Programs (IEP) in the regular education setting. Increased teacher accountability for students with disabilities has required regular education teachers to understand how to differentiate instruction for various ability levels within the classroom. The purpose of this study is to explore regular education teachers’ perceptions of inclusion of students with disabilities.

Significance of this Study

The purpose of this study was to explore regular education teachers’ perceptions of inclusion of students with disabilities. This research will give insight into perceptions of regular education teachers toward inclusion. Specifically, this research explored (1) perceptions of the impact of inclusion on instructional strategies, (2) perceived level of preparedness to effectively teach students with disabilities (3) professional development needs of regular education teachers instructing students with disabilities, and (4) collaborative relationships between regular and special educators. The results of this study may be useful to educational leaders as they plan professional learning opportunities specific to inclusion.
Research Questions

Research participants completed an online survey to address the following questions

Research Question 1: To what extent do regular education teachers perceive classroom instructional strategies are adapted for the inclusion of students with disabilities?

Research Question 2: To what extent do regular education teachers perceive their level of preparedness to teach students with disabilities in the regular education setting, while still meeting individual needs addressed in the student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP)?

Research Question 3: To what extent do regular education teachers perceive professional development opportunities offered by their school district are beneficial to effectively instructing students with disabilities?

Research Question 4: To what extent do regular education teachers perceive they receive support and assistance from the special education teacher?

Limitations and Delimitations

The study was limited to the perceptions of regular education teachers and did not take into account the perceptions of other educational stakeholders such as special education teachers and school administrators. Inclusion was the only service delivery model investigated. I did not look at teacher perceptions of resource instruction. All participants of this study were from rural school districts from northeast Tennessee; therefore, the study will not be generalized to the perceptions of all regular education
teachers. Another delimitation of the study was the research participants’ preconceived opinions and judgments of inclusion. The major limitation of the study was the number of teachers who responded to the survey compared to the number of surveys distributed.

Definitions

Accommodation: A change in an assignment of instruction that helps a student overcome or work around the disability (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2010).

Differentiated Instruction: Differentiated instruction is a teaching theory based on the premise that instructional approaches should vary and be adapted in relation to individual and diverse students in classrooms (Tomlinson, 2001).

Inclusion: Occurs when all students, regardless of disability, receive all instruction in the regular education classroom Students who receive special education service in full inclusion must receive those services in the regular education classroom (Zigmond et al., 2009).

Individualized Educational Plan (IEP): Plan developed by a team designed to meet the individual needs of a student eligible for special education services (Webb, 2006).

Modification: A change in what is being taught to or expected from the student (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2010).

Regular Education: is the program of education that typically developing children should
receive, based on state standards and evaluated by the annual state educational standards test (Webster, 2012).

Special Education: Special education is instruction that is specially designed to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability. This means education that is individually developed to address a specific child’s needs that result from his or her disability and occurs in many different educational settings depending on the needs of the individual (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2010).

Overview of the Study

This study was organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the statement of the problem, significance of this study, research questions, limitations and delimitations of the study, definitions of terms, and an overview of the study. Chapter 2 includes a review of literature. Chapter 3 explains the research methodology used for this study. Chapter 4 reports the findings of this study. Chapter 5 summarizes this study and gives recommendations for future studies.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

History

The U.S. Supreme Court decision of Plessy v Ferguson of 1896 set the tone of separate but equal in the United States. Homer Plessy, a 30 year old black male, was jailed on June 7, 1892, for sitting in the white person’s only car of the East Louisiana Railroad. The basis of Plessy’s argument in court was that the Separate Car Act violated the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments of the Constitution. The court ruled that separate facilities for blacks and whites were constitutional as long as they were equal. This decision impacted many areas of public life including public education (Webb, 2006).

In 1954 the courts reversed the Plessy ruling with the Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas ruling. On May 17, 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren stated that, “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (Webb, 2006, p. 201). This ruling led to the desegregation of the public school system; however, a decade after the ruling, 98% of Black children still attended all-Black schools. The ruling influenced the passing of The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which went further to desegregate schools by increasing the role of the federal government in the school system. Title VI of the act prohibited discrimination of students on the basis of race, color, or national origin in all programs and institutions receiving federal funds. This act also allowed the federal government to withhold funds from any institution in violation of Title VI. While neither Brown v Board of Education nor The Civil Rights Act directly deals with students with
disabilities, they both addressed the issue of exclusion. Several court cases after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that dealt with exclusion helped shape the current form of special education.

Mills v Board of Education of the District of Columbia in 1972 helped pave the way for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The case was a civil action brought in the federal US District Court for the District of Columbia on behalf of seven children with special needs (Webb, 2006). The seven students were identified as students with disabilities. These students were denied access to a free appropriate public education based on their disabilities. The District of Columbia had failed to provide publicly supported education and training to 12 year old Peter Mills and other exceptional children, members of their class, and also the excluding, suspending, expelling, reassigning, and transferring of exceptional children from regular public school classes without affording them due process of law. In a report submitted to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, prepared by the District of Columbia School District, the district admitted that an estimated 12,340 students with disabilities were not given educational services in the 1971-72 school year (Webb, 2006). The Mills case was granted class-action status to represent the interests of similar DC school children on December 21, 1971. The Board of Education alleged they could not meet these children’s needs based on the severity of their disabilities. The board believed that the expense of educating these children in a private setting would be too costly. In response, the district had these children stay at home without giving the families an opportunity for a due process hearing.
Judge Joseph Cornelius Waddy resolved the case without a trial. The judge ruled that all students must be provided with a free, appropriate public education to meet their individual needs. He also concluded that a private alternative placement must be provided at the expense of the district regardless the cost if a school district cannot provide a program suitable to meet the needs of the student (Webb, 2006).

The Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Citizens (PARC) v the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania of 1971 also had a significant impact on the current role of special education. During this time in Pennsylvania many students were excluded from the public education system solely based on their mental and physical handicaps. The parents of the children who were being excluded and the Public Interest Center of Law for Philadelphia challenged this exclusion (Webb, 2006). These parents believed their children were not receiving equal opportunity to education that was required under the Brown v Board of Education ruling in 1954. The commonwealth of Pennsylvania settled with these parents and agreed to provide a free appropriate education (FAPE) for students with disabilities in the least restricted environment (LRE). After this decision similar suits in over half the states were filed seeking the same results. This case helped lay the framework for the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) in 1975.

The Mills and PARC cases helped lay the groundwork for PL 94-192 (Itkonen, 2007). By 1973 lawsuits regarding the right to education were pending in many states, requiring the federal government to take action. Along with pending lawsuits, Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 outlawed discrimination on the basis of disability in programs receiving federal assistance (Itkonen, 2007). Advocates for
students with disabilities worked along with politicians to help develop PL 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), which was signed into law on November 29, 1975 by President Ford.

PL 94-142 was a major victory for students with disabilities. The legislation assured all students access to public education regardless of disability (Keogh, 2007). For the first time in history all children were guaranteed a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the LRE. The legislation also required students with disabilities to have an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The passage of this law had an impact on the education system, requiring colleges and universities to train and teach individuals to effectively work with students with a broad range of abilities (Keogh, 2007). The four major purposes of PL 94-142 were: (a) to assure all students were provided FAPE, (b) protect the rights of students with disabilities, (c) provide federal financial assistance to states for the education of children with disabilities, and (d) to assess the effectiveness of States efforts to educate students with disabilities (The US Department of Education, 2007a).

Efforts to improve the educational services and rights for students with disabilities have lead to several amendments to PL 94-142. In 1990 PL 94-142 was amended, which changed the name to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA changed the vocabulary for children to individuals and handicapped to disabilities, which placed the emphasis on person first language. IDEA further defined the rights of students, parents, and school systems regarding special education placement and procedures. IDEA 1990 added Autism and Traumatic Brain Injury to the list of handicapping conditions for special education eligibility. Students were required to
be evaluated by a multidisciplinary team every 3 years to determine continued eligibility for special education services (Webb, 2006). IDEA 1990 also developed and required transition plans become part of the IEP for students turning 16 during the life of the IEP to assist parents and students with the transition from high school.

IDEA has been reauthorized and amended continually throughout the years, with each reauthorization strengthening the right for students with disabilities to be included in the regular education classroom. In 1997 the reauthorization of IDEA legislated that students with disabilities have access not only to their nondisabled peers but also to the curriculum being used for their nondisabled peers (Zigmond et al., 2009). The standards based education and accountability of the No Child Left Behind of 2001 (NCLB) strengthened the notion that students with disabilities should be fully included in the regular education program and be held to the same high standards of nondisabled peers (Zigmond et al., 2009). The 2004 amendments extended federal mandates to increase and focus on state and local accountability for students with disabilities. These mandates for stronger accountability are closely aligned with the accountability mandates brought forth by NCLB (The US Department of Education, 2007b). IDEA 2004 required states to establish proficiency and participation rates for students with disabilities in standardized assessments. Along with the increased accountability for all students, the 2004 reauthorization required students with disabilities to have access to the regular education curriculum and to the regular education teachers fully qualified to teach that curriculum (Zigmond et al., 2009).

IDEA 2004 amendments changed the criteria states had previously used to determine identification and eligibility for special education services as a student with a
Specific Learning Disability. These amendments allowed states to use a response to intervention framework (RTI) when identifying students with a learning disability (Zigmond et al., 2009). This differs from the previous approach of solely relying on IQ and achievement scores to meet eligibility criteria. The purpose of the shift was to incorporate progress monitoring and scientifically based interventions into the regular education classroom. The goal of the interventions and progress monitoring data is to reduce the number to students referred and made eligible for special education services as a student with a Specific Learning Disability by focusing on interventions that can be implemented in the regular education setting.

The passage of NCLB was the most sweeping education reform since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. President George W. Bush signed the educational reform NCLB into law on January 8, 2002, with bipartisan support (Webb, 2006). The impact of NCLB affected not only regular education but also had a tremendous impact on special education. For the first time all teachers had to become highly qualified based on criteria largely defined by the federal government, and all students had to be assessed with standardized assessments (Webb, 2006). The reform was based on four pillars: stronger accountability for teachers, more freedom for states and local education departments for funding, strong emphasis on scientifically based instructional methods, choices for parents whose children attend poor performing schools.

The goal of NCLB was to have all students achieving on their grade level by 2014 (Webb, 2006). In order to achieve this goal, teachers and school districts were held more accountable than ever. NCLB accountability relies heavily on student
standardized test scores as a major indicator of student achievement. The act required all students be tested annually in reading and math in grades 3 through 8 using state prescribed test based on state developed standards, helping lead the way for a standards based education (Webb, 2006). Schools must make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward reaching proficiency goals on state testing. NCLB required all students to be assessed annually regardless of disability. The federal government gave states the flexibility to design an alternative assessment for 1% of students who are the most severely cognitively impaired. The alternative assessment must be based on alternative achievement standards closely aligned with the state standards (Perner, 2007).

The United States Department of Education created Race to the Top (RTT) in 2009 to encourage innovation and educational reform by awarding grant money to states for submitting plans that satisfied certain criteria to enhance and change education within the state. Funds awarded to states were based on two rounds of grant applications. To receive funding states had to submit plans that addressed and made changes to the required four areas: attracting and keeping teachers and educational leaders, data systems used to support instruction, use innovation and effective approaches to turn around failing schools, and demonstrate and sustain education reform (White, n.d.). As a result of RTT states made several changes to their policies related to teacher evaluations and several states agreed to implement a set of common state standards.

The expectations and impact of NCLB on education continue to shape educational reforms. One of the major goals of NCLB was to have all students perform
on grade level by the year 2014. For schools that did not meet this goal, sanctions would be put into place, and those schools would be publicly labeled as failing. Under NCLB law, a large percent of public schools would be labeled as failing by 2014 (Layton, 2011). Due to the concern over meeting such goals, President Barack Obama put a waiver in place that would excuse states from some key parts on NCLB if they adopted certain educational reforms.

States can apply for NCLB waivers, but first they must agree to meet the certain principles identified by the United States Department of Education. Under the waiver states no longer need to follow NCLB guidelines for measuring AYP, but instead they must develop achievable, annual, measurable objectives in reading, language arts, and mathematics. All states applying for the NCLB waiver submitted a request describing how they would ensure that local education agencies complied with the five principles: college and career-ready expectations for all students, state developed differentiated recognition, accountability and support, supporting effective instruction and leadership, and reducing duplication and unnecessary burden (The US Department of Education, 2012).

Growing concerns about American students being college and career-ready has led governors and chief state school officers to develop and adopt more rigorous academic content standard (The US Department of Education, 2012). States are working together to develop new standards and assessments that promote critical thinking, problem solving, and application of knowledge. In order to be granted NCLB flexibility waivers states must adopt college and career-ready standards in reading, language arts, and math as well as high-quality assessments to measure student
growth in grades 3-8 and high school. States must annually report the college-going and college credit accumulation rate for all students and student subgroups for each high school within the state.

Under the waiver states will not be held to the accountability standards outlined in NCLB; however, states must develop systems that recognize student growth and school progress. The new systems must look at student achievement in reading, language arts, and mathematics for all students and all subgroups including students with disabilities. States must also look at graduation rates for all students and school performance and progress including the performance and progress for students with disabilities (The US Department of Education, 2012). States must strive toward continuous progress and ambitious but achievable annual measurable objectives for all students. States must provide support and assistance for low performing schools and schools with the greatest achievement gaps. The adoption of a National Curriculum has been viewed by many educational reformers as a necessary improvement to the current education system. Supporters of this adoption believed that this would equalize the standard of achievement students are held to among states. The Federal Government strongly supports this adoption by requiring states to adopt a more rigorous curriculum as an eligibility component for RTT money (The US Department of Education, 2010).

Common Core

States have been held accountable for student achievement since the passing of NCLB in 2001 (Webb, 2006). States had a large amount of control over the standards they set for their students. This control caused many educators and politicians to
believe that some states lowered standards to reach the improvement required of NCLB. Arnie Duncan, Secretary of Education, expressed serious concerns in 2009 about state control over curriculum standards. He stated that “No Child Left Behind caused states to lower standards, mandated impractical remedies, and incentivized the wrong behavior among some educators who put standardized testing ahead of a well-rounded curriculum” (The Official Blog of the US Department of Education, n.d., para. #2). He has also stated, “What we have had as a country is a race to the bottom. We have 50 different standards, 50 different goal posts. And due to political pressure, those have been dumbed down” (para. #2). The concern that states lowered standards led many educators and politicians to support a national curriculum.

The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) developed the Common Core State Standards Initiative to address the concerns over unequal standards among states (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011). This initiative created common standards in Language Arts and Math released in 2010 as an effort to create a consensus among states on expectations for student knowledge. The U.S. Department of Education has placed a considerable amount of resources behind the adoption of the standards by requiring the adoption of a common set of standards among the criteria for states to receive RTT grant money.

States that adopted the Common Core State Standards agreed to implement the core standards in Math and Language Arts as at least 85% of their state standards (National Governors Association, 2010). The Common Core State Standards are a significant shift away from current educational practice which is geared toward test
preparation and mastery (Conley, 2011). These research-based standards include rigorous content and skills while focusing on a more in-depth understanding of educational concepts, and they are aligned with college and work expectations (National Governors Association, 2010). Conley (2011) stated, “the standards developers hope that creating a national consistency in expectations will lead to better uses of student learning data, higher-quality curriculum materials, teacher-preparation programs aligned with key content standards, and research results that identify what works” (p.17). The intention was to move classroom teaching away from memorizing facts toward a more engaging, challenging curriculum that supports content acquisition through instructional techniques that develop student cognitive strategies.

Conley (2011) listed the cognitive strategies in the Common Core State Standards as:

The Standards for Mathematical Practice specify the following “varieties of expertise that mathematics educators at all levels should seek to develop in their students”

1. Make sense of problems and persevere in solving them.
2. Reason abstractly and quantitatively.
3. Construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others.
4. Model with mathematics.
5. Use appropriate tools strategically.
6. Attend to precision.
7. Look for and make use of structure.
8. Look for and express regularity in repeated reasoning.
The English/Language Arts Standards specify that students should develop the following cognitively complex skills:

1. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.
2. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
3. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.
4. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
5. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.
6. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

(p. 18)

Some states have started to show resistance to the full implementation of the Common Core Standards. Some states such as Indiana have chosen to slow the implementation process (Strauss, 2013). According to Strauss (2013) educators are complaining that states have done a poor job of implementing the standards and have pushed core aligned standardized test on students too soon. Concerns have also been expressed by states regarding the long-term cost associated with implementation.

As educators prepare for the shift to Common Core, some fear that the majority of teachers are not prepared (Rothman, 2012). Teachers are challenged to increase the
focus and understanding for all students in their classroom. The intensified focus on content will require teachers to change and adapt instructional strategies highlighting the importance of teacher preparation programs and professional development for educators.

**Graduation Requirements**

Along with the shift to a more rigorous curriculum, many states have taken measures to advance graduation requirements. In 1996 a bipartisan group of governors and corporate leaders decided to create and lead an organization to support standards-based education reform across states. As a result Achieve, a bipartisan nonprofit organization that helped states raise and improve academic standards, was formed and is currently active in educational reforms (Achieve & the American Diploma Project, 2012). Governors, business leaders, and leaders in education identified graduation requirements as a critical problem with the nation’s education system. According to Achieve too few students who graduated were prepared with the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in college or to be career-ready (Achieve & the American Diploma Project, 2012). Achieve launched the American Diploma Project (ADP) in 2005 with the purpose of making college and career-readiness a priority in the states. The project currently has 35 states participating (Achieve, n.d). Governors, state education officials, postsecondary leaders, and business executives worked together through the development of ADP to improve postsecondary preparation by aligning high school standards, graduation requirements, and assessment and accountability systems with the demands of college and careers (Achieve & The American Diploma Project, 2012).
Achieve identified the following actions that ADP states committed to in order to raise career and college readiness for graduates: align high school standards and assessments with skills and knowledge needed for college and careers, establish rigorous graduation requirements that require all students to complete a college and career ready curriculum, develop statewide assessments that are related to college and career readiness expectations, and develop comprehensive accountability systems that promote college and career readiness for all students including students identified having disabilities (The ADP Network, n.d.). To implement career and college readiness actions states were given some flexibility. Tennessee is an example of a state that adopted ADP, the Tennessee Diploma Project (TDP) led by business leaders, government officials, and leaders in education across the state. As a result of the TDP, graduation requirements changed for all students beginning high school in 2009. The total required credits for graduation increased from 20 to 22, requirements in math changed from 3 credits to 4, which included Algebra I, II, geometry, and a fourth higher level math course (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.). Science requirements included biology, chemistry or physics, and a third lab course. Under the new graduation requirements all students are required to take a college readiness exam, either the ACT or SAT. Students were also required to take end-of-course tests in the following subjects: English I, II, and III; Algebra I, II, and geometry or equivalent; U.S. history; Biology I; chemistry; and physics. These exams count as a percentage of the student’s final course grade (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.).

Prior to the TDP, students with disabilities were required to pass Gateway exams in English II, Algebra I, and biology and meet IEP goals to receive a high school
diploma; there was no specific credit requirement. The TDP had an impact on students with disabilities; these students were required to achieve the same amount of credits and to participate in the same classes as students without disabilities with some flexibility. Students with disabilities who have not earned a 70 in a class with an end of course exam may participate in alternative performance based assessments. Students who have disabilities in math documented in their IEP may achieve the required math credits through approved accommodations; however, these students must complete Algebra I and geometry in order to receive a diploma. Students with documented disabilities in math or reading or delayed in both areas have some flexibility in the science requirements, but they are still required to complete Biology I and two additional lab courses (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.). Students with disabilities who completed 22 credits and their IEP with good attendance and conduct records were given a transition certificate at the end of 4 years of high school. This certificate allowed the students to continue to work toward a regular diploma until they reach 22 years of age (Tennessee Department, n.d.).

Inclusion

Special education in public schools continually changes (Zigmond et al., 2009). Many schools evolved from the traditional methods of educating students with disabilities in separate environments. This shift placed more students with disabilities in the regular classroom, leaving regular education teachers responsible for providing specialized instruction to meet individual needs. The post-NCLB era increased the focus on closing the achievement gaps among student subgroups with disabilities, with an
increased emphasis placed on the focus of curriculum access for students with disabilities (Access Center, n.d.). According to the Access Center for Improving Outcomes for All Students K-8 (n.d.), “access to the regular education curriculum occurs when students with disabilities are actively engaged in learning the content and skills that define the regular education curriculum” (p. 1). In order for students with disabilities to have appropriate access to the regular education curriculum, the Access Center identified the following indicators as being present: research-based instructional practices, research-based instructional materials and media, supports and accommodations used to help students with disabilities learn regular education content and skills, and appropriate assessment tools used to determine if students with disabilities are meeting high standards while mastering their IEP goals.

Closing the achievement gap may seem like a daunting task. A recent study of Rhode Island Schools found that many schools are raising the achievement of students with disabilities (Hawkins, 2007). The study revealed that nearly 100 of Rhode Island’s public schools made significant improvement in closing the achievement gap between students with disabilities and all students in either language arts or math with nine schools demonstrating improvement in both areas. The progress was measured by the performance of students on the New Standards Reference Exam. Hawkins identified the following successful practices in reducing the achievement gap among the schools surveyed:

Use of inclusive strategies that engage students with disabilities in regular education classrooms, holding all students to high expectations with a focus on achievement, professional development provided to all staff members in
research-based practices, employing a highly qualified staff that is trained, committed, and responsive to student needs, having teams of teachers frequently analyze student work, using multiple forms of assessment, differentiating instructional practices to address student needs, increasing instructional time in literacy, involving parents in student learning, and creating safe learning environments that incorporate incentives for success. (p. 63)

Service Delivery

Special education service delivery takes many forms. Resource pull-out programs pulled students with disabilities into separate special education classrooms and offered materials that were presented by special education teachers. Wiederholt and Chamberlain (1989) defined the resource room as being,

Any setting in the school to which students come to receive specific instruction on a regularly scheduled basis, while receiving the majority of their education elsewhere (usually in the regular school program). Therefore, resource rooms are not part-time special education classes where students with handicaps are integrated with peers only for lunch, gym, or art. They also are not consultative programs where students remain full time in a regular classroom setting where modifications are made in instruction. Neither are study halls, discipline or detention centers, or crisis rooms. (p.15)

Special education teachers in resource programs worked to deliver instruction using specialized instructional methods based on the individual needs of each student (Idol, 2006). This type of instruction is a direct service delivered by the special
education teacher in a separate setting. The resource class allowed special education teachers to instruct students based on their level of understanding, using specialized teaching methods. The instruction is intended to support the regular education curriculum while working on individual needs to help close the achievement gaps for each student. Resource instruction has faced criticism and been accused of watering down the curriculum and holding students to lower standards and expectations and often failed to meet the intended purpose of closing individual student achievement gaps. When referring to the resource setting Tomlinson (1999) stated,

“Too often in these settings, teachers’ expectations for the struggling learners decline, materials are simplified, the level of discourse is less than sterling, and the pace slackens. Too few students escape these arrangements to join more “typical” or advance classes. In other words, remedial classes keep remedial learners remedial.” (p. 21)

The consulting teacher model is a form of indirect special education service delivery. Special education students who received consultation received all academic instruction in the regular education setting with curricular modifications. The special education teacher works as a consultant to the regular education teacher, offering instructional recommendations (Idol, 2006). With this type of service students are in the regular education setting the entire day and only work indirectly the special education teacher.

Due to the pressure on school systems by the federal government to have all students performing on grade level, many schools implemented inclusion programs as the method of instruction for all students (Zigmond et al., 2010). There are different
models of inclusion programs, with special education and regular education teachers serving different roles. Some schools practice inclusion in all academic areas, while some practice inclusion for only select academic classes. Inclusion occurs when all students, regardless of disability, receive all instruction in the regular education classroom. Students who receive special education service in inclusion classrooms must receive those services in the regular education classroom (Zigmond et al., 2010). This leaves regular education teachers largely responsible for implementing Individualized Education Plans (IEP).

The success of inclusion programs depends on the teacher's ability to implement effective instructional strategies for students with disabilities. Research from Coskun, Tosun, and Macaroglu (2009) indicated that regular education teachers lack understanding and knowledge of effective instructional strategies for students with special needs. This research also revealed that teachers perceive that they do not get enough support from school and special education administrators to effectively implement full inclusion (Coskun et al., 2009).

In full inclusion classes regular education teachers are accountable for the progress and goals of all special education students in their classes. A study by deBettencourt (1999) revealed that regular education teachers who took special education courses in college used more specialized teaching methods. This study highlighted the role of the special education teacher in full inclusion and indicated that regular education teachers who were provided with time and opportunities to collaborate with special education teachers were more successful than those who did not use the special education teacher as a resource.
In a study of 40 regular education teachers Pudlas (2003) found that teachers viewed full inclusion as increased accountability, an increased work load, and an unattainable goal. Pudlas revealed that when students with disabilities were included in the regular education classroom, the teacher accommodated and provided modifications based on individual levels. The regular education teacher was responsible for the implementation of the IEP. The increased modifications and instructional adaptations needed for the success of students who are several grade levels behind others was overwhelming and time consuming for the classroom teacher. This responsibility is in addition to all the other roles and responsibilities of a classroom teacher. According to Pudlas teachers can no longer depend on whole group instruction to meet the needs of their students. Inclusion and increased accountability forced teachers to approach their job differently and required teachers to modify and adapt prior instructional methods. This change in instructional methods demanded a change in teacher preparation by college education programs and professional development opportunities offered by school district administrators.

The different types of special education delivery models left special education teachers with many responsibilities and evolving roles. In the inclusive setting, special education teachers served as consultants or coteachers or worked directly with students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom. The perceptions of inclusion for special educators varied just as those of regular education teachers. A study conducted by Orr (2009) of new special education teachers identified the following barriers to inclusion: negative attitudes of regular education teachers, lack of knowledge, and lack of administrative support. Regular education teachers widely identified negative attitudes
as the biggest barrier to inclusion found in this study. The special education teachers interviewed revealed that they experienced regular education teachers’ reactions ranged from hostility toward inclusion to less than enthusiasm to have students with disabilities in their classrooms. This study also revealed that the lack of knowledge of inclusive practices was not limited to regular education teachers, but also special education teachers. Many special education teachers in this study questioned their own abilities to successfully implement inclusion and often cited this was due to a lack of teacher preparation. The third identified barrier to inclusion was the lack of administrator support. For inclusion to be successful there must be a school-wide vision that starts with the support of educational leaders rather than isolated areas of inclusion supporters throughout the school.

Orr (2009) also identified elements that provided support and encouragement for inclusion based on the study of new special education teachers. The following factors were found to be critical to the successful implementation of inclusion: school-wide inclusive philosophy, positive attitudes of regular education teachers, and partnerships between special education and regular education teachers.

Inclusive classrooms have various roles for the special education teacher to serve. Some inclusive programs used the special education teacher in the classroom to work with students who needed additional help in small groups or individually. The goal is to assist students by using specialized scientifically based instructional strategies, rather than watering down the curriculum to gain understanding (Broderick et al., 2010). The strategies that the special education teachers use have also been identified as beneficial for all students in the classroom and not limited to use only with students
identified as having a disability. Broderick et al. (2010) stated that these strategies included “coaching students in effective group work, teaching study skills, or working with students to help develop the capacity to work independently” (p. 197).

Collaboration among regular education teachers and special education teachers is a key component to the success of inclusion. Inclusion requires the regular education teacher to work closely with the special education teacher requiring mutual understanding of instructional beliefs, mutual time for solid instructional planning, agreement on classroom structures and daily routines, and agreement and consistency of classroom discipline procedures (Cook & Friend, 1995). For strong collaborative relationships to occur both teachers must share responsibility and have equal accountability. Collaboration is critical in avoiding power struggles and territorial problems that produce ineffective instructional practices.

A study of 19 special education teachers revealed that of their many professional roles, the collaboration with the regular education teacher was of highest importance (Khaimah, 2010). Khaimah identified four essential traits of effective special education teachers who were successful collaborators: thoughtfulness, knowledge, compassion, and leadership. Thoughtfulness allowed these educators to be reflective, ethical, logical, and receptive to others in their collaborative relationship. Thoughtful collaborators used critical thinking skills to enhance the collaborative process (Khaimah, 2010). Knowledgeable special education teachers were aware of the laws, issues, and trends unique to special education. Successful special education teachers shared this knowledge to assist regular education teachers in meeting the needs of students and staying within the guidelines of the special education procedural safeguards.
Compassion allowed teachers to maintain a positive attitude when dealing with students and parents of students with special needs. This trait was critical when collaborating, because it required the teacher to stay positive and avoid negativity that can often sabotage collaborative efforts. The special education teacher needs to assume a leadership role in the collaborative relationship with regular education teachers. The knowledge of instructional strategies, understanding of educational law, and awareness of individual handicapping conditions made the leadership role a natural position for the special education teacher during the collaborative process.

Collaboration among regular and special education educators within inclusive educational settings was viewed as coteaching. Coteaching is a popular model that schools use to structure inclusion programs. Cook and Field (1995) defined coteaching as,

two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single physical space. Access to the regular education curriculum occurs when students with disabilities are actively engaged in learning the content and skills that define the regular education curriculum.

(p.1)

Both regular and special education teachers were responsible for delivering instruction within the same classroom. Schruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2007) concluded that coteaching is very effective when implemented correctly. Coteaching relationships often appeared in the following models: one teach one assist, team teaching, station teaching, parallel teaching, alternative teaching, and teachers also may rotate instructional responsibilities throughout the day. The one teach one assist
model required one teacher be responsible for leading instruction and the other teacher provided support for students who needed additional assistance. Team teaching occurred when both teachers provided direct instruction. Station teaching occurred when students were divided into three groups. Each group worked with a teacher while one group worked independently; the groups rotated until each group went to each station. Parallel teaching occurred when each teacher prepared the same lesson and taught the lesson to small groups at the same time. Alternative teaching allowed one teacher to deliver the instruction while the other teacher reviewed with students who had difficulty with the task (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012). These variations of coteaching relationships showed a benefit for students with disabilities and regular education students as well as both regular education and special education teachers (Schruggs, 2007). This model of instruction places instructional responsibility on the regular education teacher and the special education teacher.

The many different models of inclusion make identifying best practices difficult. Many instructional strategies and methods produced positive results in students’ achievement as a result of full inclusion. Teachers need to be prepared to teach all students, not just students who perform in the average to above average range. Successful inclusion requires a positive attitude by teachers. Teachers create an environment of acceptance by communicating a message of respect and acceptance of differences among students. Lastly, teachers need to adapt their instructional methods to the individual needs of the students in their classrooms. Pugach and Warger (2001) argued that “… although there has long been much agreement that the regular education classroom is the optimal placement of choice for most students with
disabilities…the student’s presence alone in regular education classrooms is not to be construed as de facto access to the curriculum” (p. 195). Teachers use instructional methods, accommodations, and modification to facilitate student learning regardless of ability level (Obiakor et al., 2012).

**Differentiated Instruction**

NCLB and IDEA revisions that support inclusion left classrooms with a more diverse population than ever. By the fourth grade children in public schools who score among the top 10% of students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) are reading at least six grade levels above those in the bottom 10% (Petrilli, 2011). The difference between children in the 25th and 75th percentiles was at least three grade levels.

More inclusion of students with disabilities has left many educators looking for ways to provide effective instruction to a heterogeneous group of students. Students with disabilities made up only a fraction of the diversity within the classroom; teachers are responsible for meeting the needs of the highest achieving, average, and lowest achieving students. The standards movement placed additional pressure on teachers to provide an equivalent education to all students. Prior to the standards movements, teachers had more flexibility over the pace and material taught. Teachers can no longer teach one lesson to all students and expect academic growth (Broderick et al., 2011). The use of differentiated instruction was identified by Hall (2002) as a way for educators to meet the variety of needs within the classroom while teaching the same standards to all students. Differentiated instruction recognized the differences among students and
allowed teachers to consider student readiness, background knowledge, language, and learning style preferences when planning and implementing instruction. The four guiding principles of differentiated instruction were identified as: a focus on essential ideas in content areas, awareness of individual student differences, the combination of assessment and instruction, and an ongoing modification of content, process, and products to meet individual needs (Tomlinson, 1999). This type of instruction was a shift in the way teachers thought about and approached teaching students with disabilities, rather than providing accommodations and “watering down” the curriculum, the classroom teacher recognized that all students learned differently at different rates and provided instruction based on all students’ individual needs (Broderick et al., 2011). Teachers who used this type of instruction were aware that all children learn in different ways and pace but still held high expectations for each student. Differentiation did not change grade level expectations or standards but rather provided a variety of avenues to master the standards based on individual need (Tomlinson, 2010). The goal of differentiating instruction was to maximize the success of each student by having the instruction meet students where they were academically (Hall, 2002).

Differentiating instruction requires effective planning. Teachers must have an understanding of their students’ strengths, weaknesses, levels of readiness, preferences, interests, and learning styles to prepare instruction. Flexible grouping is used in differentiated instruction to keep the class from becoming a homogenous group. Flexible grouping allows students to establish relationships with all of their peers rather than one set group. Teachers must properly plan and know students to keep student groupings flexible and meaningful (Broderick et al., 2011). It is the teacher’s
responsibility to plan groups that allow students with disabilities to be a helper in the
group as often as they are the helped. Along with grouping, independent practice and
learning are also an important part of the learning process. Most students want to work
independently and can when the correct supports are in place. Teachers must provide
appropriate classroom structures and support to ensure that all students are able to
work independently successfully.

The three elements of the curriculum that can be differentiated were identified as:
content, process, and products (Tomlinson, 2001). Even though the standards
movement assigns the same curriculum to each child within a grade, the content can
vary from teacher to teacher. The content is what teachers teach in their classrooms
(Levy, 2008). Each child within a class can be taught the same curriculum, but with
different content. For example, a student who was reading well below grade level was
given much less content than the student who was on grade level or above (Levy,
2008). Differentiated instruction allows for variation of content without changing or
watering down the curriculum (Levy, 2008). Teachers who differentiate instruction use
several variations of materials when teaching concepts. Hall (2002) states,

The variation seen in a differentiated classroom is most frequently the manner in
which students gain access to important learning. Access to the content is seen
as key. Teachers must align tasks and objectives to individualized learning goals
to truly differentiate instruction. By focusing on small steps aligned to the learning
goals teachers are best able to differentiate and guide the content based on
incremental steps which result in skill building and goal mastery. The goal of
differentiating content is to provide students with the same concepts but the level of complexity should vary based on the level of readiness for the student. (p. 2)

Differentiating content encourages and teaches all students to use higher order thinking skills to gain deeper understanding of the content being taught. The teacher tailors the instruction to the learner’s needs. Students with disabilities are often taught with teacher-controlled techniques that are not motivating or challenging. Educators often mistake a lack of prerequisite skills for the inability to learn and engage in higher level thinking, resulting in meaningless instruction (Broderick et al., 2011). This type of instruction is a huge misconception and teaches students to be passive learners with little interest in their education. The reality is that instruction needs to meet struggling learners at the point of their current achievement and systematically escalate their learning (Tomlinson, 1999).

Process is how teachers teach and how students learn (Levy, 2008). Process and content can appear to be similar; however, process begins when students make sense of the information presented and become able to problem solve using the learned information. To differentiate the curriculum process teachers must provide activities for various students needs, interest, and learning styles (Levy, 2008). Some effective strategies identified for students with disabilities are: collaborative discussion teams, class wide peer tutoring, book discussions, and cooperative learning groups (Broderick et al., 2011). Students each have different learning styles. We know all students do not learn alike; therefore, all students should not be taught alike. Instruction must be guided by student learning preferences (Levy, 2008).
Products are the ways students demonstrate an understanding of the skills they were taught (Levy, 2008). Products should have clear and challenging criteria for skill mastery based on grade level expectations as well as individual needs (Broderick et al., 2011). Many types of assessments are necessary to determine what level of mastery a student has developed. Differentiated assessments must reflect student learning styles and ability in order to truly measure student growth. To determine student readiness, preassessments are necessary (Hall, 2002). Teachers must have a true understanding of each individual student’s achievement level in order to effectively differentiate instruction. Assessments should be on-going rather than a single event. The assessment task that each student is asked to produce should be challenging, engaging, and accessible to essential understanding and skills. Hall states, “a well-designed student product allows varied means of expression, alternative procedures, and provides varying degrees of difficulty, types of evaluation and scoring” (p. 4).

Kapusnick and Haulslein (2001) identified the following eight strategies as the most commonly used differentiated instructional strategies: acceleration, curriculum compacting, independent study, flexible grouping, independent-learning centers, complex questions, tiered activities, and contracts. Acceleration is often used for students who demonstrate mastery of skills during the preassessments; these students are allowed to proceed on their own at a more rigorous pace than their peers. Curriculum compacting allows students to progress beyond material already mastered while staying on grade level. Students are challenged to study the curriculum in more breadth and depth than is expected for all students. Independent study is an effective strategy for students who are self-motivated. The teacher and student identify a topic
and develop a plan for the student to research and investigate the topic independently; allowing the students to proceed at their own rates. During independent study, the teacher gave guidance and provided structure that required the student to meet benchmarks to measure mastery. Flexible grouping, referred to as the foundation of differentiated instruction, ensures that students get to work with students with like and different abilities and interests while encouraging students to be comfortable and interactive while working in groups. Independent learning centers provide students with the opportunities to participate in exploratory activities that help develop a deeper understanding of the curricular content. Students participate in interactive centers that have engaging and meaningful reinforcement activities that encourage self-monitoring, reflection, and problem solving skills. Complex questions are open-ended, teacher-guided questions that provide students with the opportunity to use higher order thinking skills. When asked complex questions, students are given adequate wait time to develop their answers, and peers are encouraged to follow up and participate in group discussion. Tiered activities allow students to choose the level of accomplishment. After focusing on a concept understood by all students, the teacher develops a tiered activity. Once the concept is identified, the teacher assigns tasks of varied complexity and outcome products allowing the students choose their desired task.

The increasingly diverse classroom demands that teachers look for ways to meet the needs of many students with varying needs. More pressure and accountability was placed on teachers to raise the achievement of all students throughout the years. Teachers can no longer use traditional teaching methods that cater to one type of learner. Differentiated instruction helps teachers meet the needs of all students.
regardless of ability. This type of instruction requires the teacher to have an understanding of all students’ level of readiness, interests, and learning styles. By understanding the individual students and using assessment data to guide and direct instruction, teachers can meet the academic needs of all students, including students with disabilities in the regular education classroom (Tomlinson, 1999).

**Professional Learning**

Educators are required to be lifelong learners. Student learning increases when educators continually learn and reflect on their practices (Learning Forward, n.d.). The education system is continually changing; advances in educational research and best practices take place at a rapid rate. The demands, requirements, and accountability for the achievement of all students make meaningful and ongoing professional learning opportunities critical to the success of teachers (Jenkins & Ornelles, 2009). Coskun et al. (2009) suggested that many regular education teachers do not feel prepared to teach students with disabilities but are accountable for those students, increasing the need for professional learning. Educational leaders must understand the specific professional learning needs in order to provide effective learning opportunities.

Advances in the understanding of adult learning have led to the improvement of professional development. Previously, presenters not affiliated with the district would come into a school district, present to teachers on a topic, and leave providing little input or interaction from teachers. Joyce and Showers (1988) found that only up to 5% of learners transferred a new skill into practice as a result of theory alone; but rather 90% of learners transferred a new skill into their daily practice if theory, demonstration,
practice, feedback, and ongoing coaching were provided as elements of the professional learning program.

The adult learning theory, first introduced by Knowles in 1980, was known as the science of andragogy. The theory was known as the “art and science of helping adults learn” (Galbo, 1998). Andragogy was based upon the notion that adults learn differently from traditional students in that adults are self-directed and expected to take responsibility for their decisions. Knowles identified the following four assumptions about adult learning: adults need to know why they need to learn something, adults need to learn experientially, adults approach learning as problem-solving, and adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value (Instructional Design, n.d.). Instruction for adults should be focused less on the content and more on the process using strategies such as case studies, role playing, simulations, and self-evaluation with the instructor serving as a facilitator rather than a lecturer. The following have been identified as the seven element of the adult learning theory: climate setting, involving learners in mutual planning, involving participants in diagnosing their own needs for learning, involving learners in formulating their learning objectives, involving learners in designing learning plans, helping learners carry out their learning plans, and involving learners in evaluating their learning (Knowles, 1984).

The inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular education class is not a new concept; however, it is very possible that practicing teachers may not have been prepared for the concept in their college training (Philpott, Furey, & Penney, 2010). To face the challenges of preparing teachers for the increased accountability and more diverse learning needs, Philpott et al. (2010) identified the following six areas that
school leaders should focus professional development on: inclusive policy, diversity, nurturing positive attitudes, evidence-based teaching strategies, collaborative teaching, and meaningful teaching. Teachers rely on professional learning to increase their skills and knowledge. Based on a review a literature Archibald, Coggshall, Croft, and Goe (2011) identified the following characteristics of high-quality professional learning:

1. Alignment with school goals, state and district standards and assessments, and other professional learning activities including formative teacher evaluation
2. Focus on core content and modeling of teaching strategies for the content
3. Inclusion of opportunities for active learning of new teaching strategies
4. Provision of opportunities for collaboration among teachers
5. Inclusion of embedded follow-up and continuous feedback. (p. 3)

It is important for teachers to first experience inclusion before they are able to identify their professional learning needs (Simon & Black, 2011). Individual teacher and school factors must be taken into account when planning professional learning. McLeskey and Waldron (2002) suggested that professional learning for inclusive education include a structured set of learning opportunities that are: tailored to each school, initially engage teacher and administrator beliefs, understandings, and attitudes towards inclusion, and address the needs of all learners. Simon and Black (2011) suggested that in order for professional learning to impact student achievement it must be ongoing, incorporate training in multiple contexts, provide teachers with the opportunities to implement new skills and strategies, and provide teachers with feedback. Curriculum and instructional modifications and progress monitoring for
students with disabilities have often been identified by regular education teachers as areas of need for professional development related to inclusion.

For many educators professional learning is their main source of on-going learning and access to new instructional strategies. When provided with these opportunities, educators must take an active role in their learning in order for the opportunity to be meaningful and impact student achievement. Learning Forward, along with 40 professional associations and education organizations developed the following seven standards for professional learning: learning communities, leadership, resources, data, learning designs, implementation, and outcomes (Learning Forward, n.d.). These standards focused on the purpose of professional learning, which is for educators to develop knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions needed to improve student achievement.

Student success is largely impacted by the classroom teacher, requiring educators to continually seek out knowledge and best practices through professional learning. Working with students with disabilities requires classroom teachers to have a skill set and knowledge specific to inclusion. To successfully impact the achievement of all students, professional learning must be ongoing, practical, reflective, and collaborative (Learning Forward, n.d.).

**Conclusion**

Chapter 2 provided a review of the related literature including history, current changes, inclusion, differentiated instruction, and professional growth. Chapter 3 is a description of the research methodology including the research design, population, data
collection procedures, research questions and null hypotheses, and procedures for data analysis. Chapter 4 is an analysis of the data for each research question. Chapter 5 is a summary the study including conclusions and recommendations for practice and future research.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore regular education teachers’ perceptions of inclusion of students with disabilities. Specifically, this research explored perceptions of the impact on instructional strategies, professional development needs of regular education teachers instructing students with disabilities, and collaborative relationships between regular and special educators. This chapter provides a description of the research design, population, data collection procedures, research questions and null hypotheses, data analysis procedures, and a summary.

Quantitative research uses statistical procedures to establish relationships between measured variables (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). McMillan and Schumacher stated “a nonexperimental research design describes things that have occurred and examine relationships between things without any direct manipulation of conditions that are experienced” (p. 24). A nonexperimental research design is used for the purpose of this study. A survey was used to describe regular education teachers’ perceptions of the impact of the inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular education classroom, specifically on instructional strategies and professional learning needs.
Research Questions and Null Hypothesis

The nonexperimental quantitative design guided the following research questions and corresponding null hypotheses.

Research Question 1: To what extent do regular education teachers perceive classroom instructional strategies are adapted for inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular education classroom?

Ho1₁: Perceptions of adaptations of instructional strategies due to the inclusion of students with disabilities are not significantly different from 2.5, the neutral value.

Research Question 2: To what extent do regular education teachers perceive their level of preparedness to teach students with disabilities in the regular education setting, while still meeting individual needs addressed in the student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP)?

Ho2₁: Perceptions of preparedness to teach students with disabilities in the regular education classroom while meeting individual needs addressed in the student’s IEP are not significantly different from 2.5, the neutral value.

Research Question 3: To what extent do regular education teachers perceive professional learning opportunities offered by their school district are beneficial to effectively instructing students with disabilities?

Ho3₁: Perceptions of professional learning opportunities related to the instruction of students with disabilities are not significantly different from 2.5, the neutral value.
Research Question 4: To what extent do regular education teachers perceive they receive support and assistance from the special education teacher?

H_{04\text{a}}: Perceptions of support and assistance from the special education teacher are not significantly different from 2.5, the neutral value.

Population

The population involved in this study consisted of 996 public school teachers from three school districts identified as district A, B, and C in the First Region of Tennessee. The researcher surveyed teachers who taught during the 2012-2013 school year. The population included all academic, special education, related arts, career and technical education, and foreign language teachers in each of the participating districts. According to the 2012 Tennessee Report Card data the three districts served 14,455 students for the 2011-2012 school year, which was 1.5% of the entire state student population. School district A had 16.4% of the entire student population identified as students with disabilities, district B had 18.4%, and district C had 20.8% for the 2012-2013 school year.

Instrumentation

Based on the review of literature a survey instrument was developed (Appendix D). The 25 statement survey asked participants to indicate their degree of agreement on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. All survey responses were confidential.
Validity is described by McMillan and Schumacher (2006) as, “the degree to which scientific explanations match reality, referring to the truthfulness of findings and conclusions” (p. 104). To establish validity the survey instrument was piloted to 10 selected Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis students enrolled in classes for the Summer 2013 semester at East Tennessee State University. The pilot group made suggestions and recommendations to improve the survey. Modifications were made based on the recommendations of the pilot group.

Data Collection

Prior to beginning this research project, permission to conduct research was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of East Tennessee State University and Pamela Scott, the chair of the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis (ELPA) department. Following IRB approval a letter of permission was sent to the Director of Schools in each of the three participating districts (Appendix A). Permission was granted from each participating district’s Director of Schools before the survey was sent to the participants. The instrument was distributed to participants through the use of an online survey service, Survey Monkey. Participation in the survey was voluntary and kept anonymous. Participants were given the option to leave survey items blank if they did not want to provide the requested information.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using nonexperimental quantitative methodology. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 18.0 was used to perform the statistical
analysis of the survey data. The hypotheses were tested by a series of single sample \( t \)-tests were used to compare calculated means with 2.5 represented neutrality. The .05 level of significance was used to analyze all data.

**Summary**

Chapter 3 included the research methodology and procedures for this study. The study purpose, research design, population, data collection procedures, and research questions were explained in this chapter. Chapter 4 involves the analyzed data. Chapter 5 includes findings and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore regular education teachers' perceptions of inclusion of students with disabilities. Participants of this study included 132 regular education teachers from three school districts in the First Region of Tennessee.

In this chapter data are presented and analyzed to address four research questions and four null hypotheses. Data were analyzed from a 25-question survey measured on a 4-point Likert scale. Data were retrieved following the completion of the Perceptions of Regular Education Teachers toward Increased Accountability for Students with Disabilities Survey (Appendix D) through an online survey format.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1: To what extent do regular education teachers perceive classroom instructional strategies are adapted for the inclusion of students with disabilities?

Ho1: Perceptions of adaptations of instructional strategies due to the inclusion of students with disabilities are not significantly different from 2.5, the neutral value.

A single sample t test was conducted to evaluate whether the mean score of perceptions among regular education teachers of the degree to which they adapt
classroom instructional strategies for the inclusion of students with disabilities is significantly different from the midpoint of 2.5, the value representing neutrality. The sample mean of 3.11 (SD=.42) was significantly higher than 2.5, \( t(132) = 16.971, p<.001 \). Therefore, the null hypothesis \( H_o1 \) was rejected. The 95% confidence interval for the difference in means was .5404 to .6830. These results indicated the respondents had a significantly positive perception of their ability to adapt instructional strategies for students with disabilities. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the participant responses. The frequency reported within each column represents the number of participants who designated a 1, 2, 3, or 4 on the online survey.
Figure 1. Distribution of Perceived Extent to Which Instructional Strategies are Adapted for Instruction. In order to determine teachers perceptions, responses to the following items were analyzed from the survey: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2: To what extent do regular education teachers perceive their level of preparedness to teach students with disabilities in the regular education
setting, while still meeting individual needs addressed in the student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP)?

Ho2: Perceptions of preparedness to teach students with disabilities in the regular education classroom while meeting individual needs addressed in the student’s IEP are not significantly different from 2.5, the neutral value.

A single sample t test was conducted to evaluate whether the mean score of perceptions among regular education teachers who perceive they are prepared to teach students with disabilities in a regular education is significantly different from the midpoint of 2.5 the value representing neutrality. The sample mean of 2.77 (SD = .51) was significantly higher than 2.5, \( t (132) = 6.06, p<.001 \). The test was significant, \( t (132) = 6.06, p<.001 \). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The 95% confidence interval for the difference in means was .182 and .358. The results indicated the respondents had a significantly positive perception of their level of preparedness of teach students with disabilities. Figure 2 shows the distributions of participants responses. The frequency reported within each column represents the number of participants who designated a 1, 2, 3, or 4 on the online survey.
Figure 2. Distribution of Perceived Extent to Which Teachers Feel Prepared to Teach Students with Disabilities. In order to determine teachers perceptions, responses to the following items were analyzed from the survey: 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14.
Research Question 3

Research Question 3: To what extent do regular education teachers perceive professional learning opportunities offered by their school district are beneficial to effectively instructing students with disabilities?

$Ho_{31}$: Perceptions of professional learning opportunities related to the instruction of students with disabilities are not significantly different from 2.5, the neutral value.

A single sample t test was conducted to evaluate whether the mean score of perceptions among regular education teachers who perceive they receive professional learning opportunities offered by their school district that are beneficial to effectively instruction students with disabilities was significantly different from 2.5, the value representing neutrality. The sample mean of 2.46 (SD .65) was slightly but not significantly below 2.5, $t(132) = -.782, p = .435$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was retained. The 95% confidence interval for the difference in means was -.1547 to .0670. These results indicated the respondents do not have a significantly positive perception of the professional learning opportunities offered by their district. Figure 3 shows the distributions for the two groups. The frequency reported within each column represents the number of participants who designated a 1, 2, 3, or 4 on the online survey.
Figure 3. Distribution of Perceived Benefits of Professional Development for teaching students with disabilities. In order to determine teachers’ perceptions, responses to the following items were analyzed from the survey: 15, 16, and 17.
Research Question 4

Research Question 4: To what extent do regular education teachers perceive they receive support and assistance from the special education teacher?

Ho4: Perceptions of support and assistance from the special education teacher are not significantly different from 2.5, the neutral value.

A single sample t test was conducted to evaluate whether the mean score of perceptions among regular education teachers who perceive they receive support from the special education teacher in their building was significantly different from 2.5, the value representing neutrality. The sample mean of 2.71 (SD = .56) was significantly higher than 2.5, $t(132) = 4.225$, $p<.001$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The 95% confidence interval for the difference in means was .1092 to .3015. These results indicated the respondents had a significantly positive perception of the support they receive from the special education teacher in their class. Figure 4 shows the distributions of participants' responses. The frequency reported within each column represents the number of participants who designated a 1, 2, 3, or 4 on the online survey.
Figure 4: Distribution of Perceived Level of Support from Special Education Teacher. In order to determine teachers perceptions, responses to the following items were analyzed from the survey: 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, and 25.

Summary

In this chapter data obtained from regular education teachers from three school districts in the First Region of Tennessee were presented and analyzed. There were four research questions and four null hypotheses. All data were collected through an online survey.
CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This chapter contains the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for readers who may use the results as a resource when reviewing and revising inclusion policies. The purpose of this study was to explore regular education teachers’ perceptions of inclusion of students with disabilities. The study was conducted using data collected through using an online survey of K-12 regular education teachers working in three school districts located in the First Region of Tennessee.

Summary

The statistical analysis reported in this study was based on four research questions presented in Chapters 1 and 3. In Chapter 3 each research question had one null hypothesis. Each hypothesis was analyzed using an independent samples t-test. The number of K-12 regular education teacher participants in this study was 132. The level of significance used in the test was .05. Findings indicated that overall regular education teachers’ perceptions of increased accountability for students with disabilities were positive.
Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of regular education teachers of inclusion of students with disabilities. Specifically, this research explored (1) perceptions of the impact of inclusion on instructional strategies, (2) perceived level of preparedness to effectively teach students with disabilities, (3) professional development needs of regular education teachers instructing students with disabilities, and (4) collaborative relationships between regular and special educators.

The following conclusions were based upon the findings from the data in this study:

1. A significant difference was found in regular education teachers perceptions about how they adapt instructional strategies for the inclusion of students with disabilities in the classroom. The population mean of 3.12 was significantly higher than 2.5, the value representing neutrality. In order to determine teachers perceptions, the following items were analyzed from the survey: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. These results suggest that the participants of this study adapt their instructional strategies for students with disabilities. In contrast to the finding reported by Coskun et al. (2009) that indicated regular education teachers lack understanding and knowledge of how to adapt instructional strategies for students with disabilities, these findings indicated that regular education teachers adapt their instruction to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the inclusive setting. Research from the Access Center (n.d.)
identified adapting scientifically based instructional strategies for students with disabilities as a critical factor to the success of inclusion.

2. A significant difference was found in regular education teachers perceptions of preparedness to teach students with disabilities. The population mean of 2.77 was significantly higher than 2.5, the value representing neutrality. In order to determine teachers perceptions, the following items were analyzed from the survey: 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14. These results suggest that participants of this study perceive that they are prepared to teach students with disabilities in the regular education setting. In contrast Orr (2009) identified lack of knowledge and preparation as barriers to the success of inclusion. This study also revealed that the lack of knowledge of inclusive practices was not limited to regular education teachers but also included special education teachers. Many special education teachers in this study questioned their own abilities to successfully implement inclusion, and often cited this was due to a lack of teacher preparation. According to Pudlas (2003) regular education teachers feel that inclusion is an unattainable goal. Pudlas (2003) reported that teacher preparation programs must change and increase the amount of special education training regular education teachers receive.

3. A significant difference was not found in regular education teachers perceived opportunities for professional development that are beneficial to inclusion. The population mean of 2.46 was slightly lower than 2.5, the value
representing neutrality. In order to determine teacher perceptions the following items were analyzed from the survey: 15, 16, and 17. These results suggest that teachers do not feel they receive a great deal of benefits from the professional development opportunities they received that are focused on inclusion. These results support findings from Coskun et al. (2009) which revealed that teachers do not perceive they receive the amount of support needed to implement inclusion from administrators. Philpott et al. (2010) supported the need for meaningful professional development for inclusion. To face the challenges of preparing teachers for the increased accountability and more diverse learning needs, Philpott et al. (2010) identified the following six areas on which school leaders should focus professional development: inclusive policy, diversity, nurturing positive attitudes, evidence-based teaching strategies, collaborative teaching, and meaningful teaching.

4. A significant difference was found in regular education teachers’ perceptions of the amount of support and assistance they receive from the special education teacher in their building. The population mean of 2.71 was higher than 2.5, the value representing neutrality. In order to determine teacher perceptions the following items were analyzed from the survey: 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, and 25. These results suggest that teachers perceive they receive support and assistance from the special education teacher they work with. These results support findings from Khaimah (2010) that revealed from a study of 19 special education teachers of their many professional roles collaboration with regular education teachers is their most important role.
Collaboration among regular education teachers and special education teachers is a key component to the success of inclusion. These results conflict with the results from a study from Coskun et al. (2009) that suggested teachers do not feel they receive enough support from special education to successfully implement full inclusion.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The findings and conclusions of this research have enabled me to identify the following recommendations for inclusion practices for regular education teachers:

1. The teachers in the districts surveyed should continue to work to further strengthen their implementation of differentiated instructional strategies for students with disabilities. The research question addressing adapting instructional strategies for students with disabilities had the highest mean (3.11), identifying that teachers perceive they do adapt their instructional strategies for students with disabilities. With more and more students with disabilities in the regular education setting adapting instructional strategies is increasingly important. Teachers who participated in this study should continue to adapt their instructional strategies for students with disabilities.

2. The teachers in the districts that participated in this study should work to increase the level of preparedness of teachers to teach students with disabilities. Veteran and mentor teachers who excel in teaching inclusion could work with new teachers to help prepare them to teach students with
disabilities in the inclusive educational setting. The research question addressing perceived level of preparedness to teach students with disabilities had the second lowest mean of (2.77), identifying this as an area that could benefit from additional support. Pudlas (2003) suggested that inclusion demanded a change in teacher preparation by college education programs and professional development opportunities offered by school district administrators.

3. The administrators in the districts that participated in the study should work to ensure that quality on-going professional development opportunities related to inclusion should be offered. The research question related to teacher perceptions of meaningful professional development related to inclusion had the lowest mean (2.45), identifying professional development as an area that could benefit from additional support. This supports findings by Orr (2009) that revealed regular education teachers feel lack of administrator support was a major barrier to the success of inclusion. This finding also supports the claim made by Simon and Black (2011) that curriculum and instructional modifications and progress monitoring for students with disabilities have often been identified by regular education teachers as areas of need for professional development related to inclusion.

4. The administrators and teachers in the districts that participated in the study should work to ensure that special education teachers are supportive and collaborative with regular education teachers. Administrators should work to
create opportunities for regular and special education teachers to collaborate with shared planning times and active participation in professional learning communities within the school. Inclusion requires the regular education teacher to work closely with the special education teacher requiring mutual understanding of instructional beliefs, mutual time for solid instructional planning, agreement on classroom structures and daily routines, and agreement and consistency of classroom discipline procedures (Cook & Friend, 1995).

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The results of this study indicate that overall regular education teachers’ perceptions of the increased accountability and inclusion of students with disabilities were positive. Recommendations for future research include expanding the study to all teachers in the First Region of Tennessee. The study could be expanded by comparing the perceptions of regular education teachers to special education teachers’ perceptions toward inclusion. Further, the perceived professional development needs of teachers for inclusion could be studied. The professional development activities that are perceived as helpful could also be examined to further this research.
Summary

The results of this study suggested that overall regular education teachers have a positive perception of inclusion. Participants of the study indicated that they have a positive perception of their ability to adapt instructional strategies for students with disabilities. The participants also indicated that they feel prepared to teach students with disabilities in the regular education setting. The study results also suggested that the participants perceive they are not offered meaningful professional development opportunities focused on inclusion. Lastly, results indicated that respondents had a positive perception of the amount of support they receive from special education teachers.

This study used a quantitative research design to examine the perceptions of regular education teachers toward the increased accountability of students with disabilities. Chapter 1 included the introduction, statement of the problem, significance of the study, research questions, limitations and delimititations, definition of terms, and overview of study. Chapter 2 provided a review of literature providing a summary of the history of special education, current changes in education, inclusion, differentiated instruction, and professional learning. Chapter 3 was a description of the research methodology and procedures that were used in completing this study. Chapter 4 provided a description of quantitative data related to this study. Chapter 5 included a summary of findings, conclusions about this research, recommendations for practice, and recommendations for future study.
REFERENCES


The Access Center. (n.d). What does it Mean to improve access to the regular education curriculum? Retrieved from [http://k8accesscenter.org](http://k8accesscenter.org)


APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

IRB Approval

East Tennessee State University Office for the Protection of Human Research Subjects  □ Box 70565 □
Johnson City, Tennessee 37614-1707 Phone: (423) 439-6053 Fax: (423) 439-6060

Accredited Since December 2005

IRB APPROVAL – Initial Exempt
July 10, 2013
Mindy Myers
RE: Perceptions of Regular Education Teachers about the Increased Accountability for
Students with Disabilities
IRB#: c0613.14e
On July 8, 2013, an exempt approval was granted in accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2). It is understood this project will be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Policies. No continuing review is required. The exempt approval will be reported to the convened board on the next agenda.
· xform New Protocol Submission; Email letter to Teachers; Survey; External Site
Permissions for Greene, Johnson & Carter County Schools; References; CV

Projects involving Mountain States Health Alliance must also be approved by
MSHA following IRB approval prior to initiating the study.
Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks to Subjects or Others must be reported to the IRB
(and VA R&D if applicable) within 10 working days.
Proposed changes in approved research cannot be initiated without IRB review and
approval. The only exception to this rule is that a change can be made prior to IRB
approval when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the research subjects
[21 CFR 56.108 (a)(4)]. In such a case, the IRB must be promptly informed of the change
following its implementation (within 10 working days) on Form 109 (www.etsu.edu/irb).
The IRB will review the change to determine that it is consistent with ensuring the subject’s
continued welfare.
Sincerely,
Chris Ayres, Chair

ETSU Campus IRB
20 May 2012

Dear Fellow Educator:

As a doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership at East Tennessee State University, I am requesting to conduct research through an online survey with the teachers in your district. The purpose of this quantitative study is to analyze the perceptions of teachers in 3 public school districts in upper east Tennessee about the increased accountability for students’ with disabilities. With your permission, teachers will receive an email link to an online survey consisting of four demographic questions and 25 statements that ask the respondents to indicate their degree of agreement on a 4-point Likert scale. The survey will not be sent to teachers until August. Participation is strictly voluntary and all results are completely anonymous. The survey should take no longer than 10 minutes to complete. I have attached a copy of the survey. Please respond by email at your earliest convenience.

Thank you,

Mindy Myers
Educational Diagnostician
Washington County Schools
ETSU Doctoral Student
Dear Teacher:

You are invited to participate in a research study I am conducting to analyze the perceptions of regular education teachers about the increased accountability for students with disabilities. My hope is that, by participating in this research, you will have the opportunity to candidly share and reflect on your experiences with teaching students with disabilities.

Taking approximately ten minutes, your participation involves completing a structured online survey from Survey Monkey consisting of 25 Likert-scale questions. This study has no foreseen risk involved. You may choose not to answer any question at any time, and you may stop at any time or chose not to submit the survey without penalty. You may refuse to participate. Your participation in this study will be completely anonymous with no way for me or Survey Monkey to connect you with your responses. Survey responses will be analyzed in aggregate, or group form, which also ensures that all information provided remains confidential. Survey data will be stored on a secure computer file to which only I have access.

All aspects of your participation in this study are voluntary and confidential. All participants must be 18 years or older to complete the survey. If you have any research-related problems or questions about the research, you may contact me at mindymyers04@gmail.com. If you have any questions or concerns about the research and want to talk to someone independent of the researcher, you may call the ETSU Institutional Review Board at 423-439-6002. Click on the following link to complete the survey.

Please complete the survey no later than Friday, August 16th. Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,

Mindy Myers  
Doctoral Candidate  
Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis  
East Tennessee State University  
Johnson City, Tennessee  
mindymyers04@gmail.com
APPENDIX D

Survey

Students with Disabilities: Perceptions of Regular Education Teachers Toward the Increased Accountability

by Mindy Myers

Rate each of the following statements using the following scale:

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. Agree
4. Strongly Agree

1. Inclusion positively impacts students with disabilities.

2. I adapt my instructional strategies to meet the needs of all students.

3. I differentiate instruction based on individual learning needs.

4. I vary my instructional strategies to accommodate students with disabilities.

5. I plan my instructional strategies based on the learning styles of all my students.

6. I understand which instructional strategies are most effective for specific special education handicapping conditions.

7. My instructional strategies are adapted to implement the IEPs of students with disabilities.

8. It is possible to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities in the regular education setting.

9. I have knowledge and understanding of special education.

10. I am qualified to teach students with disabilities effectively.

11. I provide adequate instruction to students with disabilities.
12. My teacher preparation program prepared me to teach students with disabilities.

13. I understand how to effectively implement a student’s IEP.

14. I am able to meet the needs of students with and without disabilities in the same educational setting.

15. I receive meaningful professional development to differentiate instruction.

16. I am offered professional development opportunities that are designed to assist me with teaching students with disabilities.

17. The professional development I have received has helped me better understand inclusion.

18. I have adequate support to assist me in designing instruction to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

19. I have adequate input in developing the IEPs for the students in my class.

20. I work well with the special education teacher in my building.

21. I collaborate sufficiently with the special education teacher when planning instruction.

22. The special education teacher in my building effectively communicates specific information regarding the students with disabilities in my class.

23. I receive assistance on modifying instructional content from the special education teacher in my building.

24. I have enough time to regularly meet with the special education teacher in my building.

25. I have ample time to modify instructional content.
VITA

MINDY MYERS

Personal Data:  
Date of Birth: December 20, 1979  
Place of Birth: Johnson City, TN

Education:  
Doctor of Education, Educational Leadership 2013  
East Tennessee State University  
Johnson City, TN

Master of Education 2006  
East Tennessee State University  
Johnson City, TN

Bachelor of Science 2003  
Special Education  
East Tennessee State University

Professional Experience:  
Special Education Supervisor  
2013-present  
Unicoi County Schools  
Erwin, TN

Educational Diagnostician  
2008-2013  
Washington County Schools  
Jonesborough, TN

Special Education Teacher  
David Crockett High School  
2004-2008  
Washington County Schools  
Jonesborough, TN