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***ABSTRACT***

At the beginning of the year, if I was making copies of something I might forget to count Jon: I just didn't deal with him .... When I count the kids in my class now, I've counted Jon. It just took me a while.

These were the words of a teacher as she described a transformation in her perspective related to educating a child with severe disabilities in her general education, 2nd-grade class. :cm BT ers99 andprofesdlad

Although many educators support the inclusion of most students with disabilities in general education classes (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987; Will, 1986), some question the appropriateness of extending the general class placement option to students with severe disabilities (Jenkins, Pious, & Jewell, 1990). Much of the national debate regarding the appropriateness of general class placement for all students has remained theoretical and speculative. On a more concrete level, there is an increasing availability and growing support for the placement of students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms (Giangreco & Putnam, 1991; Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Stainback & Stainback, 1991; Thousand & Villa, 1990; Williams, Fox, Thousand, & Fox, 1990; York & Vandercook, 1990).

In Vermont, students with severe disabilities have been receiving special education supports in general education class placements since 1984 (Schattman, 1992; Thousand et al., 1986; Williams et al., 1986). Most Vermont school districts offer some integrated educational programs for students who were previously segregated in special classes or special schools. A growing number of districts are including all of their students with disabilities, including those with severe disabilities, in general education placements and are no longer providing a special class model (Thousand & Villa, 1990).

The classrooms described in this article are not presented as model sites, although some may be. Their approach to the education of students with severe disabilities, however, reflects emerging support for the inclusion of students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms and challenges traditional notions regarding the need for centralized special classes or special schools. This study examines the first-hand experiences and perspectives of many general education teachers who have taught students with severe disabilities in their general education classes.

these students' combined sensory and motoric disabilities, it often is difficult to accurately determine their level of cognitive functioning and subsequently to determine which of their impairments is most responsible for the students' profoundly delayed level of functioning.

Fourteen of the teachers were women, five were men. Their teaching experience ranged from 2 to 21 years. All were certified in general education; three also had special education certification. Only two of the teachers reported receiving any inservice training designed to prepare them for including a student with severe disabilities in a general education classroom any time during the 3 years preceding the student's placement. All 19 teachers had a paraprofessional (e.g., teacher aide) assigned to their classrooms; access to ongoing support from district or regional special educators and related service

**TABLE 1**  
**Summary of Information Regarding General Education Teachers**

Teacher	Grades Taught	Sex	Education	Certification	Years Experience	Years with DSI Student	Interviewer*	Student Characteristics
1	K	M	Bachelor's	Elementary	15	1	MG	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
2	K	F	Bachelor's	Elementary	6	1	MG	DSI, severe orthopedic disability
3	K	F	Bachelor's	Elementary & Special Education	2	1	MG	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
4	K	F	Bachelor's	Elementary	8	1	MG	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
5	1	F	Master's	Elementary	17	1	MG	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
6	1	F	Bachelor's	Elementary	4	1	MG	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
7	2	F	Bachelor's	Elementary	20	1	RS	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
8	2	F	Bachelor's	Elementary	2	1	MG	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
9	2-3	F	Master's	Elementary & Special Education	10	2	MG	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
10	3	M	Master's	Elementary	18	1	CC	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
11	3	M	Master's	Elementary	18	1	RS	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
12	3	F	Master's	Elementary	7	1	RS	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
13	3	F	Bachelor's	Elementary	13	1	MG	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
14	4	F	Bachelor's	Elementary	2	1	RS	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability

**TABLE 1**  
**(continued)**

Teacher	Grades Taught	Sex	Education	Certification	Years Experience	Years with DSI Student	Interviewer*	Student Characteristics
15	4	F	Master's	Elementary	14	1	CC	DSI, profound retardation, severe orthopedic disability
16	4-5	F						

become more positive as a result of teaching a child with significant disabilities," and "Given appropriate supports, I would welcome a student with significant disabilities in my class in the future." Surveys were obtained from 18 of the 19 teachers.

To ensure that the principal investigator was thoroughly familiar with the data before data analysis, he listened to all interview tapes, read each transcribed interview as each was completed, and re-read all interview transcripts after they were completed. Analysis of interview data consisted of categorical coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Initially 81 codes (e.g., expectations, disruptions, support) were developed to describe portions of text. After the initial coding of all interviews, each interview transcript was re-coded by adding, combining, or separating previously coded text. These 57 subsequent codes assisted in identifying emerging themes in the data.

Given the volume of interview data, HyperQual (Padilia, 1990), a text-sorting program, was used to sort the data by code. HyperQual was used to generate 57 code-specific reports. These reports reorganized text data into related groups. This assisted with the identification of themes and subthemes that could then be considered for analysis. Once themes were identified, positive and negative occurrences were highlighted and organized to assist in understanding the interview data. The research team reviewed these sequenced themes to ensure that the analysis was consistent with and not contradictory to their interview experiences with the teachers. Statistical computation of survey data was conducted using the Statistical Analysis System (SAS, 1985).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained the importance of testing the constructions of researchers for factual and interpretative accuracy to establish evidence of credibility and confirmability. In September 1991, a report including the description of the study's subjects and the results of analyses from the interview data were sent to all 19 teachers. They were asked to read the report and answer the following questions:

1. Are you satisfied that your anonymity was maintained so you are not personally identifiable?
2. Based on your interview, do you find the content of the report accurate?
3. Were quotes you gave in your interview, if used, used accurately and appropriately?
4. Do the themes presented in this report include the information you gave us in your interview?

their forms within 2 weeks were contacted by phone to respond verbally to the member-check questions. Eighteen of the 19 teachers responded to the member check. Respondents' recommendations were limited to minor errors regarding teachers' characteristics (e.g., years of experience, type of certification). All teachers responded affirmatively to the substantive aspects of Questions 1-4. Sixteen of the 18 responding teachers commented positively about the results, two did not. Teacher responses were used to adjust the final presentation of the study.

Each teacher in this study had a student with severe disabilities in his or her general education class. The majority of teachers in this study were asked or volunteered to accept a student with severe disabilities in their classes. Most teachers stated that acceptance of a student with severe disabilities was contingent on receipt of "supports" (e.g., paraprofessional, consultant, technical assistance). In addition, most teachers agreed to the placement of a student with severe disabilities in their class with an understanding that the placement was not necessarily permanent, and could be changed at any time during the school year. "We decided we would try it. It was pretty much done on a trial basis to begin with." The initial placement was also considered a choice that most teachers could accept or reject. As one middle school teacher said, "She [special educator] made it very clear that I did not have to do it. She didn't want to push me into it, and it would be fine if I said 'No. '"

Regardless of how the student with severe disabilities was placed in the general education class, most teachers reacted to the initial placement in a cautious or negative manner. They described their feelings with the terms, "reluctant," "scared," "nervous," "leery," "apprehensive," "unqualified," "angry," and "worried." One teacher said, "I didn't know much about how to deal with him and how to respond to him and interact with him. I was afraid." Another pondered, "I certainly was wondering how she was going to fit in, how I was going to include her in everything, not having experience myself; not knowing what to expect." Others questioned the wisdom of such a placement:

My reaction was, I don't feel like she belongs in a public school. She was so extremely handicapped and I remember what she looked like. Her hands were always in front of her face and she just didn't seem to have any connection with

focus was more on he's going to be in there; we are going to see how it works. The aide is going to take care of him. I guess that was how I looked at it; I wasn't going to have much to do with him, so why not let them try it?" As a result, some teachers initially did not view themselves as the child's teacher in the same way they saw themselves as the teacher for the other students in the class.

Often, a teacher aide or assistant, without the benefit of training related to inclusionary practices, had the primary responsibility for day-to-day decision making and program implementation. Frequently these paraprofessionals had correspondingly limited contact with the hosting classroom teacher. As a result, different teachers explained:

I don't think of him as one of the children that I educate.

I'm basically in charge of the nondisabled kids' academic curriculum.

The aide will be more or less responsible for seeing to his needs.

To be honest, we've included her very little .... You're very busy with other students, and she kind of gets lost in the shuffle.

As far as being trained, in knowing specifics about how to adapt the activity for Sam's needs, I didn't feel competent in making those decisions. And the aide that was in my room at the time was very good at taking the activity that I was doing with the other children and pulling Sam in on it.

Interestingly, some teachers expressed greater confidence in the abilities of untrained, substantively unsupervised, paraprofessionals than they did in their own abilities.

For two teachers, the initial experiences remained relatively unchanged throughout the school year, characterized by lack of ownership for the child's education.

I can't actually say that there were too many times that I sat down with Linda and actually did things with her; I never specifically worked with Linda.

I still haven't really connected with her.

I never felt like I really developed a relationship with him like you do with a child going through the year.



Sometimes this lack of ownership was pronounced.

I'm so busy focusing on the other 22 kids that I don't even notice that she's here. Twice we left the room, once to go to lunch and once to go outside, forgetting that she was here and the aide wasn't in the room. The second time I realized when I got outside and sent a kid up right away, but the first time we had gone down to lunch I was totally oblivious because she was so quiet. My attention is totally on the other kids. I didn't notice whether she was present or absent, to be honest.

However, 17 of the 19 teachers experienced increased ownership and involvement with the student with severe disabilities in their classes over the course of the school year. We refer to this as transformation. The extent of transformation varied widely among teachers. Those who experienced changes challenged their original expectations for the student with severe disabilities and for themselves. They increased their responsibility for the student's educational program and their personal interaction with the student. The cautious and negative comments used to discuss their initial reactions were replaced by descriptors such as, "positive," "good," "successful," "interesting," "amazed," "pleased," "great," "wonderful," and "enjoyment."

The positive adjectives used by teachers to describe their experiences were verified by their responses to the survey statements. In response to the statement, "My attitudes about educating students with significant disabilities in general education have become more positive as a result of teaching a child with significant disabilities," the teachers indicated strong agreement by responding with a mean score of 8.59 (SD = 2.46) on the 10-point scale. Fourteen of the teachers rated this item 8 or higher; 10 teachers gave it the highest agreement score (10). The standard deviation was widened by one teacher who rated this item 1. This teacher's low rating was consistent with her interview, which indicated that transformation, as we have discussed it, did not occur for this person. In reference to the statement, "Given appropriate supports, I would welcome a student with significant disabilities in my class in the future," the teachers also indicated strong agreement by responding with a mean score of 8.74 (SD = 1.39).

Transformations were gradual and progressive rather than discrete and abrupt. Teachers described an emerging recognition that their initial expectations regarding the student with disabilities were based on unsubstantiated assumptions. This prompted teachers to



Nothing here is so outrageous that I can't learn it.

Now that I have dealt with her, I have rolled her down the hill and I've taken her sliding with the other kids and stuff. She's a little girl like everyone else.

When I started finally having some interactions with him, he would come right over with his walker up to my desk, hold onto the desk, and put his butt around like he wanted to get up on my lap. And I would pick him up and he would look up at me and smile and he would put his hand on my face, and so you knew when he was content.

The 17 teachers who changed reported an increase in their sense of ownership for the child's education.

It's easy to expect the aide to do everything lot that student, and then you think now you don't have to deal with it at all, but it doesn't .... I mean I suppose it could work that way, but I don't think that you would get much out of it.

I feel very comfortable with her. Very often I have her for periods in the classroom when the aides aren't there, and that's no problem at all.

I'm the one that's going to make the plans for that student. I'm responsible for his success in my classroom.

I think you have to see them as another one of the children in class who has some strengths, some weaknesses; and you need to find out where they are at and how you can help them.

To me, he was just one of the kids in the class. I think you really need to have that attitude.

Finally, these teachers displayed a willingness to learn from their students.

I started watching my own regular classroom students.

They were always letting me know when I forgot something. "You didn't remember to include Sarah." So they were very good at letting me know.

The kids help you figure it out.

As mentioned previously, some teachers feared that they would need to use a lot of "special" materials and approaches for the student with severe disabilities in their class. Although these students did have many unique characteristics, a common approach used by teachers was to "treat him like any other kid in the class." One teacher explained, "I just included her in everything that we did." In part, this approach was motivated by the teacher's feeling that, "I didn't want to single her out and make her feel different in any way." The frequency with which the student with disabilities was included in the same activities as the other classmates, even when his or her educational objectives were different, seemed to be an indicator of the extent of teacher transformation. The teachers' approach was to recognize and build on the similarities among students with and without disabilities.

Teachers reported favoring approaches that encouraged students to learn together (e.g., cooperative learning, group problem-solving). They also emphasized approaches that were active, participatory, and typical rather than specialized (e.g., manipulatives, games, projects, labs, field study). One teacher said:

I don't try to lecture as much and cut down on that; and try to get activities, game playing, things like that. The class may be noisier or more active than a class which stresses lecture and just sitting there quietly.

Teachers reported that the physical presence of another person on whom they could rely was helpful; this minimized the feeling of being alone or totally responsible. Paraprofessionals were often mentioned as important support persons. This was partly a result of the frequency of contact paraprofessionals had with students and teachers.





A second benefit for the students with disabilities included in general education classes was skill acquisition. Students learned a variety of communication, social, motor, academic, and other skills to assist in participation in home, school, and community life. One teacher indicated:

He is growing accustomed to the way people do things. He is more able to carry on a conversation and stay relevant for more than two sentences. He is learning turn taking; I'm sure that it was worked on before, but I think in a regular classroom you really learn it or someone is on your case all the time.

Some teachers indicated that skill development was only one potential benefit of general class placement. They spoke about other aspects of the child's school experience that enhanced the quality of the student's life. The general education placement provided the students with opportunities, enjoyment, and challenges.

Even if she is plateauing, she's still being challenged. There are new things that people try to make her do or get her to do even if she is just doing all she's ever done before; it may be more than laying around on the floor.

Sometimes during music class when they would be singing, Susie would almost laugh because she was hearing the song; and even though she wasn't singing, she was enjoying it, being part of it by just being there.

I think that just opens up so many doors and avenues and there are role models there; and there are just so many other things available to them that wouldn't be available if they were in a room with children who were very similar to themselves.

He taught them [people at school] that he can learn.

***Classmates' Experiences.*** Teachers discussed benefits of inclusion for the students without disabilities in their classes. A common theme was awareness of the needs of people with disabilities. Teachers also described a range of acceptance of the student with disabilities by classmates that resembled those among other students. For example, there would be some students in the class who would "seek him out" and "gravitate" toward him without encouragement. The majority of students accepted his presence and were rather nonchalant about it.

I also saw in them the willingness to have him there in that room, to treat him like everybody else; that they didn't feel that he was any different.



I never heard them say, "Poor Jon ," or "Jon can't do this, Jon can't do that." It was always, "Come on, Jon, let's go!" Never any pitying attitude.

Teachers indicated that those children who sought out the student with a disability "accept her readily, they enjoy having her, they get excited about little projects that she does and her successes; they like sitting next to her in circle." Although not a universal experience, several of the children with disabilities had classmates without disabilities as "best buddies." They would "take him to lunch or hang out with him on the playground." An elementary teacher shared the following experience:

One little boy wanted to take him home, to stay overnight, like he would any other friend. The mother was quite reluctant and said, "No, because I don't know what we are going to do with him." She was very nervous about it.

But finally, the little boy said to her, "Mom, you let me have other friends over. Why can't I have Jon over? He's just like anybody else." And she realized that if he can look at it that way, she would be able to. So she had him over .... She said it really opened her eyes to see her son playing with this little boy just like he was anybody else; he had him outside talking and laughing and playing with him, just like anybody else.

Some teachers attributed these experiences of students to an increased level of social/emotional development, flexibility, and empathy.

***Personal and Professional Impact of Inclusion on the Teachers.*** Teachers who transformed discussed how their experiences caused them to be more reflective.

It made me more aware of how important it is for someone like that to be included... to be with her peers, to be in a regular classroom.

It makes you stop and think about an awful lot.

I was ashamed of myself for feeling the way I did at the beginning of the year, that I had this opinion and belief when I really didn't know anything about it.

Several teachers recognized their importance as a model for the class.

The first few weeks they [students without disabilities] were watching me .... They really looked toward me to see: Is this OK? They watch the adults and see what their reaction is and then model them. I mean that is a real

important part of education, what you model. I also think kids accept things quicker than adults in some ways.



disabilities and their rights to an appropriate education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990. Several teachers reported being offered the option to accept or reject the student with disabilities in their classroom. Though the rationale for providing teachers with options may be understandable (e.g., trying not to force a teacher to assume a responsibility for which he or she feels unprepared or simply wishes to avoid), such a choice represents a double standard that simply would not be tolerated based on other individual differences among students (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic level, religion, political affiliation). What if no one says "Yes"? In a national and state system that purports equal access and education for all students, such choices to reject or accept a student based on a teacher's individual values and predispositions is a contradiction in terms. We contend that educational equity will continue to elude us as long as we apply different standards to students whom we are unaccustomed to teaching.

One of the interesting aspects of the background data was that these teachers did not have much, if any, training to prepare them for the experience of having a student with severe disabilities in their class. Yet almost all teachers described successful experiences following their initial apprehensions. Whereas preparatory training may be beneficial, these data suggest that the direct experience of working with the child on an ongoing basis was a critical factor in the transformation of teachers; and episodic training is unlikely to simulate this experience. There was some speculation by teachers that their initial fears often interfered with their internalizing skills taught in more traditional workshops and inservice training. This finding has implications for both the content of training and the timing of its delivery. For example, once a class placement decision has been made, initial training might consist of information about (a) other teachers' feelings and experiences in similar situations; (b) critical factors influencing success to start the year (e.g., teamwork, expectations of ownership, interaction with the student, learning from the class), and (c) approaches described by experienced teachers as successful (e.g., activity-based approaches, use of typical materials and activities, group strategies).

Clearly, the students with whom these teachers worked had characteristics that required some level of specialized support within a teamwork context. It seems evident that paraprofessional support was critical in some situations. Participants in this study had varied and diverse opinions regarding the role and responsibilities of paraprofessionals in the classroom. A clear job description for paraprofessionals that matches the needs of students in general education settings and their teachers appears needed. Paraprofessional support may be an important factor, external to the teacher, that has an impact on the level and rate of transformation. When paraprofessionals assume, or are directed to take, primary or exclusive ownership for the student's education, they may inadvertently create physical, psychological, or symbolic barriers to interactions between the teacher, classmates, and student with disabilities.

The role of specialists was viewed as both facilitative of and a barrier to the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes. The kind of help teachers said they could do without (i.e., separate goals by specialists, disruption to the class routine, overspecialization) often occurred when specialists attempted to transplant traditional special education practices into general education environments. This was neither

welcomed nor considered helpful by general education teachers. The inclusion of students with severe disabilities in general education settings required specialists to more fully consider the context of the general education class and ensure that their support respected the values and needs of the general education classroom, its students, and the teacher.

The perspectives described by the teachers in this study are valuable because a relatively small number of general education teachers have shared experiences similar to those described here. Undoubtedly, the number is increasing with the passing of every school year. Although it is our hope that the experiences of these teachers will help other teachers facing similar challenges, our ultimate hope is that such an article will be obsolete in the near future. As Biklen and Knoll (1987) so clearly articulated, "Integration survives as an issue only so long as someone is segregated" (p. 21).

[TABULAR DATA OMITTED]

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