

The Benefits of Inclusion for Peers Without Disabilities

A Master's Research Project Presented to

The Faculty of the College of Education

Ohio University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Education

by

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May, 2010

This Master's Research Project has been approved  
for the Department of Teacher Education

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### Abstract

Inclusive education is becoming more common in the education of students with disabilities. Several benefits have been found for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. However, the benefits for their peers without disabilities have not been as widely researched. Most of the research conducted collected data in classrooms that included students with moderate to severe disabilities. This study explored the benefits for students without disabilities in two inclusive fifth grade science classes in a southeastern Ohio middle school. Both classes were including students with mild to moderate support needs. Observations, questionnaires, and interviews were triangulated in order to discover relationships, prejudices, support systems, distractions, and academic benefits for students without disabilities. Results found general education students forming relationships with peers, who have IEP's, inside and outside of the classroom. The classrooms were united and accepting of diversity. Yet, in conclusion, a larger sample with greater diversity of age, inclusive settings, and a focus on academic achievement is required to make overarching judgments about successful strategies and inclusive programs.

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Many benefits have been found for students with disabilities when placed in an inclusive classroom (Lipsky & Gartner, 1994; Frostad & Pijl, 2007; Zions, 2005; Bouck, 2009; Janney and Snell, 1996). Several studies have determined the best inclusive methods to use to benefit students the most (Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006; Zions, 2005; Katz & Mirenda, 2002; Falvey, 1995). While other studies have concentrated on support systems, such as peer tutoring, are effective and necessary for successful inclusion. Zions (2005) found peer tutoring to be a positive support for both students with and without disabilities. Although there is ample research on the effect of inclusion for students with disabilities, the effects of inclusion on students without disabilities have often been overlooked (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Peck, Staub, Gallucci, & Schwartz, 2004; Sharpe, York, & Knight, 1994). The purpose of this study was to identify if some of the benefits noted in the limited research on the effect of inclusion on peers without special needs could be seen in a specific school in southeast Ohio. The following study presents the analysis of on-going social relationships and groupings within two inclusive classrooms in this region.

Students were asked to respond to questions about friendships and group work in the classroom. This study intended to provide feedback for educators and schools about the benefits for peers without IEP's in the classroom and how they perceive their fellow classmates with disabilities. Most of the research that analyzes benefits for students without disabilities was conducted in inclusive classrooms that integrated students with severe disabilities. This study observed, surveyed, and interviewed students from a fifth grade classroom that integrated students with mild to moderate disabilities.

### **A Review of the Literature**

The Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 reauthorized a component which mandates that students with disabilities be taught in the least restrictive environment (LRE) possible. This component of IDEIA requires children to be taught with their typical peers to the maximum extent appropriate. Some educators feel that the LRE is full inclusion into a general education classroom. However, there are many different ways the term inclusion can be interpreted. Correa-Torres (2008) defined inclusion as the education of students with disabilities and their typically developing peers in a general school setting being educated together, thus emphasizing place. Inclusion also should include a sense of belonging in the classroom and not just a placement. Research relates successful learning and a sense of community as being equally important (Frederickson, Simmonds, Evans, Soulsby, 2007). Warnock (2005) stated that the feeling of belonging is important for both successful learning and general well-being. Key to this feeling of belonging is the establishment of relationships with other members within the class. Relationships have even been found between a student's sense of community and increased academic motivation, engagement, and better behavior (McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002; Osterman, 2000). Inclusion is meant to give all children equal access to education and equal opportunity to shared experiences with their peers (Falvey, 1995; Lipsky & Gartner, 1994). Taken in this sense, successful inclusion is more than just a physical placement into a general education classroom but the systematic way in which educators manage the social environments of their classrooms for real relationships to develop among the individuals that make up their classes. Unfortunately, inclusion is often misunderstood as being synonymous with the physical mainstreaming of students with special needs into normalized

settings without consideration of strategies to enhance membership to the new setting.

### **History and Evolution of Inclusion**

In order to understand how inclusion came about, it is necessary to look at the history of special education. Rights for people with disabilities stemmed from the context of the Civil Rights movement during the 1960's and 1970's (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* established that the separate but equal doctrine was not constitutional. This court case focused on the segregation of race, however it helped to establish rights for individuals with disabilities as well (Keefe & Davis, 1998). By using the results of *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Commonwealth* overturned the law that allowed schools to turn away students with disabilities because of claims that they are “uneducable” or “untrainable” (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). Another court case, *Mills v. Board of Education*, stated that schools are not relieved of the responsibility of enrolling students with disabilities based on financial exigencies (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). With the help of these cases, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) was enacted in 1975 and gave the right to attend school to all students with disabilities. During this time an early form of inclusion was attempted, but during this period most educators used the term mainstreaming.

Although there are several variations of the definition of mainstreaming, most sources seem to agree that it is defined as the selective integration of students with disabilities in general education classes without a system of support (Zionts, 2005). However, sources tend to disagree on which classes are covered under the definition of mainstreaming. Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, and Smith (2004) described mainstreaming as the integration of students with disabilities into

general education classes that are non-academic, such as physical education and art class. Under this style of mainstreaming, students remain in their special education classes most of the day. In contrast, Mary Falvey (1995) included both academic and non-academic general education classes in her definition. She described mainstreaming as students simply being “dumped” into general education classes without the support needed for the students to be successful.

In an effort to differentiate inclusion from mainstreaming, researchers and advocates of inclusion began defining inclusion as a process of integrating students with disabilities into general education classes while including the necessary support system (Lipsky & Gartner, 1994; Keefe & Davis, 1998). According to these definitions, inclusion can be divided into two different types: selective inclusion and full inclusion. Selective inclusion occurs when students attend both academic and non-academic general education classes as well as some segregated special education classes. This differs from mainstreaming in that there is a system of support in place to help students succeed in their class placement (Zionts, 2005). In contrast, full inclusion is a “zero-reject” policy that calls for the accommodation of all students in all general education classes (Zionts, 2005).

Some supports for inclusion are administrative support, support personnel such as paraprofessionals and special educators, and peer supports. Another support includes time for planning and collaboration between paraprofessionals, special educators, other related service providers and general educators (Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006). Extra teacher planning time, additional collaboration, and the use of a variety of specialist can bring several benefits for both students with and without disabilities (Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006). Peer supports also have been shown to help students with disabilities both socially and academically, but they also help

students without disabilities become more engaged in academics, complete assignments, and build empathy (Cushing & Kennedy, 1997). Some accommodations include differentiated instruction, integrated use of adaptive devices and assistive technologies, curriculum and performance based assessment, and community-based instruction. All are strategies that tier instruction to the ability levels of all students in the classroom (Katz & Mirenda, 2002).

### **Inclusion Benefits for Students with Special Needs**

The goal of inclusion is to prepare both students with and without disabilities to become contributing members of their community and society (Lipsky & Gartner, 1994). Typically, the purpose of including students with disabilities into the classroom at an early age is to promote social skills. Frostad and Pijl (2007) found that the gap between the social skills of students with disabilities and their typically developing peers increases the longer students with disabilities are excluded from the general education classroom. Downing and Peckman-Harding (2007) also found that students without disabilities learned empathy when included in the general education classroom. This is important because low empathy scores go hand in hand with having few friends and the lack of a feeling of belonging to the school community (Frostad & Pijl, 2007). Other benefits of inclusion for students with disabilities are senses of normalcy, respect, and dignity (Zionts, 2005). Students with disabilities must learn how to communicate with their peers in the classroom, just like they must do to succeed in society as adults.

Another possible benefit of inclusion is that friendships will result from the classroom interactions and that these friendships will become future natural supports for the students into adulthood. When students with disabilities are in segregated classrooms, the number and types of friendships they can have are limited. However, just placing students within general education

settings does not guarantee reciprocal social relationships. Research has found that without the proper support the benefits of social interactions and friendships are not ensured even in an inclusive classroom (Sapon-Shevin, Dobbelaere, Corrigan, Goodman, & Mastin, 1998; Taylor, Peterson, McMurray-Schwarz, & Guillou, 2002). According to Falvey (1995), friendships and relationships are extremely important to students with disabilities because they provide support and nurture the skills that they will need to participate and work in their local communities. When included with the proper supports, students with disabilities of all severities gain more meaningful friendships (Vaughn, Elbaum, Schumm, & Hughes, 1998).

Research has also shown academic improvements for students with disabilities when included in the general education classroom. One explanation for this is the expectations and demands of a general education classroom are typically greater than those of a pull-out special education classroom (Zionts, 2005). The curriculum delivered in a pull-out service is sometimes diluted compared to the curriculum in a general education classroom, and as some research has stated, special educators providing instruction in resource rooms are often not highly qualified in the specific content area they are assigned to teach (Zionts, 2005; Bouck, 2009).

Another possible reason students with disabilities improve in achievement is, as Janney and Snell (1996) have suggested that students with disabilities seem to have higher self-confidence and exhibit greater independence when working with peers in the general education classroom. If done correctly, inclusion gives students with special needs the same support, resources, and opportunities to learn as they would get in special classes or segregated schools.

### **Social Benefits of Inclusion for Students Without Disabilities**

While research has found that inclusion benefits the student with special needs, there

continues to be a concern for the education of students without disabilities in these placements (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Murphy, 1996; Sharpe et al., 1994). Although the results are not well known, several researchers have found that both students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities benefit from inclusion (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Romer & Haring, 1994; Peck, Carlson, & Helmsetter, 1992). One of the main benefits of inclusion for students without special needs is a greater awareness of disabilities which Fisher (1999) suggested caused an increase in students' empathy and tolerance. Carter and Kennedy (2006) also found that students without disabilities, who were in inclusive classrooms, showed greater appreciation of diversity and raised expectations of their classmates with severe disabilities. They also found that these typically developing students gained self esteem and developed new friendships (Carter & Kennedy, 2006). Vaughn et al. (1998) also found that average to high-achieving students in inclusive settings showed increases in peer acceptance and friendship quality within a year's time.

Other researchers have found that the longer students with disabilities were included in a general education classroom, the more accepting their peers without disabilities became (Krajewski & Hyde, 2000; Townsend, Wilton, & Vakilirad, 1993). The inclusion of students with disabilities into the classroom is necessary for their classmates to learn acceptance. Frederickson et al. (2007) reported that students with severe disabilities in pull-out special education classrooms were less accepted than those who were included. Many studies have shown the same positive social impacts inclusion has had on the attitudes of typically developing peers (Bunch & Valeo, 2004; Esposito & Reed, 1986; Fisher, 1999; Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002).

Although both friendship and acceptance are important goals in inclusive classrooms for both students with disabilities and their typically developing peers, Boutot (2007) explained how friendship between these students could not occur until the children without disabilities accepted those with disabilities. This acceptance does not come without being planned systematically. Without the proper supports, students with disabilities may not be accepted and instead disrupt the class and monopolize the teacher's attention (Shukla, Kennedy & Cushing, 1998). Most advocates for inclusion explain the negative social outcomes as the results of incorrect implementations of inclusion (Frederickson et. al., 2007).

### **Academic Benefits of Inclusion for Students Without Disabilities**

Although many parents are accepting of inclusion, some parents of typically developing students are still concerned about including students with disabilities because they believe their children's education will be made less challenging (Peck et al., 2004; Sharpe et al., 1994; Cushing & Kennedy, 1997). However, students without disabilities have also been shown to benefit academically from inclusive classrooms (Dugan, Kamps, Leonard, Watkins, Rheinberger, & Stackhaus, 1995; Shukla et al., 1998; Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Cushing & Kennedy, 1997; Carter, Cushing, Clark, & Kennedy, 2005). Research found that students with disabilities often had unique viewpoints on topics during discussions which allowed their peers without disabilities to extend their thinking (Copeland, McCall, Williams, Guth, Carter, Fowler, Presley, & Huges, 2002). Copeland et al. (2002) noted several teachers reporting positive changes in their students' behavior and achievement. Students with disabilities were found to be role models for typically developing students because they tended to be interested in the subject material and completed assignments carefully (Copeland et al., 2002).

Cushing and Kennedy (1997), found that when typically developing students served as peer supports for students with moderate to severe disabilities in an inclusive classroom, they improved academically. Peer support, as defined by Haring & Breen (1992), is a method found in some inclusive classrooms that allows one or more general education students to work with a student with disabilities and use strategies to facilitate social interactions. Cushing and Kennedy (1997) found that typically developing students' academic engagement, assignment completion, grading, and perceived classroom participation all improved under this method. The students used in their study all performed below ideal levels in the classes that were observed, and their study gave no evidence that the same academic improvements would occur for those at or above the ideal level of performance. Shukla et al., (1998), researched Cushing and Kennedy's limitation and observed both students who were at or above the desired performance (receiving A's and B's) and below the desired performance (receiving C's or below). They found that students who were at or above desired performance levels showed no significant changes in their academic performance. However, the students performing below level showed improvements when placed in an inclusive classroom. Although the academic benefits from an inclusive classroom for high performing students without disabilities are not copious, several studies show that there is no decline in their academic achievement when placed in an inclusive classroom (Sharpe et al., 1994; Bailey & Winston, 1989).

Researchers attributed the increase in academic performance for typically developing students who are below the desired performance level to several different attributes. Cushing & Kennedy (1997) thought peers without disabilities were forced to increase their contact with the content because they were responsible for another student's academic success. Carter & Kennedy

(2006) stated that students received more adult feedback and were expected to closely attend to the class material because of the added responsibility. An increase in contact with general educators, special educators, and paraprofessionals was also cited as a possible reason for the increases in academic performance (Cushing & Kennedy, 1997; Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Shukla et al., 1998). Cushing & Kennedy (1997) found that the extra help students without disabilities received from the special education personnel increased in-class work completion.

### **Peer Mediated Learning**

One specific support system that has been found to help both students with and without disabilities is peer tutoring. Peer tutoring, a method which allows students to model, practice, teach, and support each other, has been found to be a successful strategy within an inclusive classroom (Zionts, 2005). Research found that peer tutoring improved reading skills, comprehension, and social interaction for both students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities (Katz & Mirenda, 2002). One typically developing student that was involved in peer tutoring became motivated to enter a wheelchair swing into a science fair. This student improved academically through this project, but more importantly built friendships through the process (Katz & Mirenda, 2002). Furthermore, according to Katz and Mirenda (2002), students that are involved in peer tutoring learn to relate academic content to a greater extent because they are actively teaching rather than passively listening to the material.

Peer tutoring also allows for several social benefits for both students with and without disabilities. Kentucky's Danville High School (DHS) initially allowed peers without special needs to receive course credit for peer tutoring. It was the hope of the educators that through structured tutoring sessions, social interactions and friendships would form. However, DHS

reformed their program, putting a greater focus on teaching the peer tutors about people with disabilities and answering any concerns that they had.. It allowed the typically developing students to gain insight in their peers' lives and develop their own opinions about the social issues concerning students with disabilities. They found this new way of training students very effective (Longwill & Kleinert, 1998). When peer tutors were interviewed, they reported that they had benefited from the experience. Some of these benefits included understanding differences between peers, improved self-concept, more commitment to moral action, and greater acceptance of family and friends (Peck et al., 1992).

Although peer mediated learning has shown to be an effective method of inclusion, students must have the appropriate supports to be successful. Dugan et al. (1995), found that both students with and without disabilities benefit from cooperative learning, a peer mediated strategy that requires small groups of students working together to accomplish a common goal. Downing and Peckham-Hardin (2007) discussed both curricular and instructional supports required for peer mediated learning. Curricular supports included both classroom modifications, that are individualized, relevant, and meaningful, as well as assistive technology for students with moderate to severe disabilities. The instructional supports included allowing students to have breaks when needed, giving students the opportunity to practice skills being taught, and actively engaging students in the curriculum using hands-on activities. (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007). As an instructional support, Lohrmann and Bambara (2006) discussed the importance of “an atmosphere where asking for help is risk-free” (171). Students in Carter and Kennedy's (2006) research study were taught strategies to use during peer tutoring including:

- (a) adapting class activities to facilitate their participation;
- (b) contributing to the attainment

of IEP goals; (c) supporting behavior intervention plans, when appropriate; (d) providing frequent, positive feedback; (e) modeling age-appropriate and contextually relevant communication skills; (f) and facilitating interactions with other students in the class. (p. 285)

As Carter and Kennedy (2006) noted, each of these supports need to be modeled by the paraprofessionals and intervention specialists and monitored closely. In order for modeling and monitoring to be successful, constant collaboration between general educators, paraprofessionals, and intervention specialists is necessary, whether conducted formally or informally (Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006; Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

An inclusive classroom can bring benefits to everyone involved if teachers are willing to collaborate and provide the support necessary for inclusion. Even though there are many parents and educators concerned about the effects of inclusion, there are several different methods of inclusion that have shown both academic and social benefits for students with and without disabilities. Inclusion not only gives the student with special needs the ability to learn from his or her peers, but it also has shown to bring about increases in academic achievement and enhanced social-emotional skills for their peers without disabilities. Students without disabilities who are placed in inclusive classrooms have shown an increase in awareness of disability issues, enhanced social circles, and a greater appreciation of diversity. Although several benefits have been found, the present study was conducted to expand the research and study the benefits of inclusion for peers without disabilities in one school in southeastern Ohio with limited resources. Understanding more about the benefits that are gained from an inclusive classroom used in this case study for typically developing students might help determine better implementations of

inclusion in more contextual ways.

### **Methodology**

Most of the research about the benefits of inclusion on students without disabilities analyzes specific inclusion methods. Past research studies were often conducted with classes that include students with moderate to severe disabilities (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Frederickson et al., 2007, Cushing & Kennedy, 1997). With this study, I hope to expand the present research by presenting a case study analysis of an inclusive classroom where students with mild to moderate disabilities are integrated. Peers without special needs were found to be more accepting of students with severe disabilities when placed in an inclusive classroom (Frederickson et al., 2007). Boutot (2007) found acceptance to be important in the classroom because it is a necessary step in the formation of friendships. Because of this importance, this case study will look further into the truth of the acceptance of students with mild to moderate disabilities in an inclusive classroom in Lands Oak Middle School, a southeastern Ohio school.

A case study, as explained by Creswell (2008), “is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals”. (p.13) A case study method was chosen for this study to investigate attitudes of students without disabilities toward their peers with disabilities. Questions concerning these attitudes arose while I was student teaching at Lands Oak Middle School. The particular inclusive classrooms were selected based on a purposeful selection method versus a random one because the students who were integrated in both classes have a range of abilities from mild to moderate. Case studies have limited generalizations and this particular one was limited by time in the field. However, several forms of data collection were used to triangulate for validity. Observations, questionnaires, and

interviews were all used to analyze typically developing students' social interactions with their peers with disabilities. Readers should use discretion when generalizing the results because only two classes at one particular site in southeast Ohio were analyzed. Nevertheless, the information found could have some meaningful connections to other schools with limited resources that have some of the following characteristics.

### **Setting and Subjects**

Lands Oak Middle School is located in rural southeastern Ohio. It is racially homogeneous with 96.4% of its population Caucasian. In 2008, the county's population was 28,975 with 9.8% having a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). The Lands Oak School district covers the entire county and is composed of five elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. As of the 2008-2009 school year, the district had 3,960 students enrolled. Of these students, 51.1% are considered economically disadvantaged and 18.6% have some type of disability. The middle school just recently underwent renovations and added new rooms. The fifth grade was added to the middle school this year. Previously fifth grade was offered in each of the five elementary schools.

At Lands Oak Middle School, the fifth grade classes are set up so that the same class of students is together for the entire day, but they switch between two classroom teachers. Language arts and mathematics are in the morning, science and social studies are in the afternoon, and they are separated for study skills, specials, and lunch. However, some students with disabilities are pulled out for language arts and mathematics in the morning and placed back into the general education science and social studies curriculum in the afternoon with the support of an intervention specialist. The classes observed during this study were fully inclusive classes,

however Lands Oak Middle School has a selective inclusive classroom, where students are not fully included in all of their classes for the whole day.

This study observed 53 students from two fifth grade science classes taught by the same teacher during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> periods. The 6<sup>th</sup> period class consisted of 25 students including five students who have been identified as having disabilities. All five receive language arts in resource rooms away from their peers in the morning. Only one of the five is also segregated for mathematics, only joining his peers in the afternoons. An aide attended the class to assist one student who has a vision impairment. The 7<sup>th</sup> period class consisted of 28 students including eight students who have been identified as having disabilities. All eight students with disabilities receive language arts and mathematics in resource rooms away from their peers. An intervention specialist attends this class Monday through Thursday as an additional support, using the one teach, one support model of cooperative teaching.

Of the 53 students, 37 students completed surveys for this study, 29 students without disabilities and eight students with disabilities. Nineteen of the 25 students in the 6<sup>th</sup> period science class returned their parental consent forms to complete surveys including all five students with disabilities. Of these 19 students, ten were girls and nine were boys. Eighteen of the 28 students in the 7<sup>th</sup> period science class returned their parental consent forms to complete the survey. Eight were girls and ten were boys. Only three of the eight students with disabilities completed surveys. All students were between 10-12 years old and enrolled in an inclusive science class.

Three students without disabilities from each class were chosen to be interviewed. Two girls and one boy from each class period were taken out of study skills for approximately a

ten minute interview. Each student was chosen based on a questionnaire response that related to the research question.

### **Data Collection**

Both the principal of Lands Oak Middle School and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Ohio University were contacted and approved the study and questions that would be given to students. Permission to collect student responses on both the questionnaires and interviews was requested through parental consent forms (see Appendix A) given to each student in both fifth grade classes explaining the purpose of study and the confidentiality for each individual student.

During the questionnaire, interview, and in the consent form, the participants were told that this study was analyzing social relationships and likes and dislikes of group work and not concerning the analysis of relationship formation between students with and without disabilities. This limited deception was used to limit the students giving biased answers about the students with disabilities. The questions used were structured in ways that if any social relationships were being formed with students with disabilities, it came up naturally within the context of the questions on their friendships and work partners.

The students were reminded that their information would remain private and that it would be used without releasing their identities. The students were given several options to opt out of participation in the study. Students were told that they were not required to fill out the questionnaire. The students also were given an identification code on their questionnaire form on the top right hand corner. The code was matched with a seating chart so that I, the researcher, was the only one who had access to information about the students' identities. The students also were given a copy of the identification code on their questionnaire along with the researcher's

contact information in case they wanted to decline their participation any time after submitting their questionnaire.

### **Instruments**

Observations were one method of data collection during this case study. Observations were taken for two weeks during both science classes. Observations are advantageous to a case study because students' actions within the classroom may be different than what is told during an interview or on a questionnaire (Creswell, 2008). One downside to observations is that they are often limited by the researcher becoming intrusive or being unable to gain rapport (Creswell, 2008). Since I completed my student teaching experience at Lands Oak Middle School and have taught both science classes during that time, rapport was not a challenge.

The next form of data collection used during this study was a questionnaire (see Appendix B). The questionnaire was designed to allow for an analysis of several different aspects of the inclusive classroom. Every student in the inclusive classroom who was given permission and chose to be involved was given a questionnaire. Students responded to several questions about their friends and partners in class and the questionnaire required students to answer questions about their likes and dislikes about group work. The questionnaire consisted of questions that were related to students' feelings about peers with disabilities and how they are accepted in the classroom. A questionnaire is often a good data collection tool because it can be conducted in a timely manner and can allow generalizations of a large population from a small population (Creswell, 2008). Although a questionnaire gives good insight, some students may not take it seriously and the students were not held responsible for the effort being put forth.

The final form of data collection used were interviews (See Appendix C). Three

students in each science class were chosen based on questionnaire responses to be interviewed individually. The students were asked questions about what they saw in their classroom, instead of what they did in an attempt to keep students more open about their experiences. The interviews analyzed relationships students had with their peers in more detail than the questionnaire. The same three questions were asked to all students and some additional questions were asked to either clarify or gather more detail from student responses to the questionnaire. The interviews were audio taped and kept for transcription purposes. Although interviews can often present biased responses because of the researcher's presence and not all students may be able to articulate their thoughts, it still allows the researcher to question students about feelings that might not have been evident in either the observations or elaborated in the questionnaire (Creswell, 2008).

### **Data Analysis**

According to Charmaz (2006), a constant comparative method can be used to find general patterns and specific themes in data. After all data was collected, I used this method to triangulate the data from the questionnaires, interviews, and observations. Four major themes emerged from triangulation of the data including, are you my friend?, the distracting student, did you call me a name?, lend me a helping hand, and counting off groups. During the triangulation, answers were coded thematically. After the first round of coding, the themes were then compared and were contrasted with findings from the literature review in order to highlight both similarities and differences in order to discover any overarching themes. From this, the data was then organized under these final overarching themes in order to move to a discussion of the evidence and to suggest possible future points of research and classroom suggestions.

**Limitations**

Some considerations must be made when generalizing findings from this study to other inclusive settings and schools. This study reflects fifth graders in a specific inclusive setting in Appalachian Ohio. Only two classes, taught by the same teacher, were studied, so discrepancies may be found with different classrooms and teachers. The students were only observed for two weeks and the questionnaires and interviews relied on self-reporting. However, through several methods of data collection, the information obtained does seem to accurately reflect the benefits and concerns of the fifth graders at Lands Oak Middle School.

**Results****Are you my friend?**

In order to determine if friendship dyads were forming between students with and students without disabilities, participants were asked to name four people they sit with at lunch on the questionnaire. Each of the eight students with IEP's reported that they sit with at least one peer without disabilities from one of the inclusive science classes. Three of the 14 students without disabilities from 6th period and four of the 15 students from 7th period reported that they sat with at least one student with a disability during lunch. Although students were not observed during lunch, these same students were seen associating with the same students with IEP's during science class.

Students were asked if they had made any new friends during science. This question was posed in order to determine if the inclusion of students with disabilities allowed for friendships or at least social supports to occur in the class with a variety of same-aged peers with and

without disabilities. The answers for both classes were close. A total of 17 students answering 'yes', 15 students answering 'no', and the remaining five students with various answers such as 'I don't know'. During the interviews, some of the students expressed that they did not know most of the students in their classes because of the merging of the elementary schools that occurred. One student said he was new to this school but he still knew everyone in his class. By not mentioning or targeting students with disabilities, one assumption might be that all students had adequate time to get to know each other and students with disabilities were not secluded from their classmates.

In order to discover if just the simple act of including students with special needs would give their peers a chance to get to know them, the students were asked to name one of their peers in science who they felt they did not know very well. The assumption was that students with disabilities would be named as those not well known in the classroom if peers without disabilities did not have the time to form friendships with them. In the 6th period class, of all the students that were listed, only two students with disabilities were noted. Each of the two students were mentioned exactly once by two different typically developing peers. In 7th period, two students with disabilities were named twice. One of the students was named by a fellow student with an IEP. While observing the class, the students with disabilities who were named by their peers were very quiet and passive students. Two students who said they did not know a student with an IEP well were interviewed and asked why this was the case. One student without a disability said "We aren't usually partners" and the other student, also without a disability, said "I don't really talk to them a lot and when I do they usually run away." In a different interview, another student without special needs was asked when one would have time to get to know an

unfamiliar peer. The student said “during lunch and study skills” and acted as if there was plenty of available time if she wanted to get to know the students. Even without direct teacher intervention methods for assisting students to build understanding and tolerance for students with disabilities, same-age-peers left to their own socializing habits within this setting do not seem to intentionally exclude or include students with disabilities in this setting. It seems if a student is at least recognized as a peer in the classroom, students have the opportunity to socialize in settings outside the classroom. In other words, one might say that just the simple act of including students with mild disabilities will give them at least an equal chance to become a full member of a classroom community with all the benefits and challenges a peer identified as typical would have. However, one questions what could be done if more systematic ways of pairing were used.

### **The distracting student**

In order to determine whether students with disabilities were distracting to classmates and if students with disabilities were often disciplined, a question was asked to students being interviewed about whether there were some students who got into trouble often, who these students were, and why they thought they got into trouble. Sharpe et al. (1994) noted that parents and general educators often use behavior and distractions to learning as a reason to not include students with disabilities into the general education classroom. None of the six students who were interviewed answered the question with the name of a student with an IEP. The only time a student with a disability was named occurred during an interview of one typically developing student who was often named by others as a trouble maker and his answer to the question was, “I don't know, I don't really pay attention, I just do my work ... usually, but I do talk a lot to [student with an IEP].” He was asked if he got in trouble for that behavior and he said “Every

once in a while”. He also said that the student with an IEP got in trouble “every once in a while” as well.

While observing 6th period, it was very rare for a student with a disability to have any behavior problems, however several students without special needs were disciplined. During 7th period, several students, both with and without disabilities, were seen getting into trouble. Two students with disabilities were often disciplined, but these same students were not named by their peers during interviews as students who get into trouble often. In 7th period, a lot of the discipline occurred privately between the intervention specialist and one student with a disability who was seen misbehaving. It was often the intervention specialist's specific duty to manage the students with disabilities behavior.

### **Did you call me a name?**

During interviews, each student was asked if peers in their class called others names along with who and why. This question was designed to point to whether students with disabilities were targeted for name calling or if students with disabilities were often name callers themselves. Research states that students without disabilities become more accepting, build empathy, and show a greater appreciation of diversity when in an inclusive classroom (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Fisher, 1999). For instance, six different students were named as being name callers, while only one of those students was named twice. None of these students named as being name callers or being called names were students with disabilities. During an interview with one of the identified name-callers, when asked whether students in his science class were called names, he responded “No, not really, I don't remember really”. This shows that this student was not aware of his own name calling behavior or he was not admitting to it.

Students were not often observed calling names during science. One student without a disability did call his peer without disabilities a “wuss” because he was wearing pink. On the questionnaires, students used names to describe why they did not want to have particular peers as partners. Names such as “mean”, “annoying”, “jerk”, and “liar” were the most common among all students. However during interviews, two students mentioned names that were more degrading involving a derogatory comment about intellectual capacity than the questionnaire responses showed. One student said peers used the terms “idiot and loser” while the other student stated the term “retard”. This implies that although names of an intellectually derogatory fashion have been used in the classroom, the names are not directed specifically towards students with identified intellectual disabilities.

### **Lend me a helping hand**

In the questionnaire, students were asked to name two people they would not like having as partners and to describe why. The question was asked to find out whether students without disabilities would choose students with disabilities and to find out some reasons, if any, for this decision. In 6th period, three of the 14 students without disabilities chose two different students with IEP's as those they did want to have as partners. In the 7th period class, five of the 15 students without disabilities named students with disabilities as those they would not like to have as partners. The same student with an IEP was named by four of these five participants. Therefore, only two of the eight students with IEP's were targeted for exclusion during the 7<sup>th</sup> period class by the interviewed students. All of the students named at least one student without a disability when answering this question. In combination, out of the 13 students with disabilities, nine of them were not mentioned as difficult partners. This suggests that reasons for exclusion

were based on more idiosyncratic reasons than due to any global indices of disability. The student with a disability, who was named four different times, is also a student that was observed being off task most of the time. This student was consistently being reprimanded for not doing his work, not bringing appropriate materials to class, and talking to others during inappropriate times, leading one to think that with the proper positive behavior support, he might be more included.

Students also described their reasoning behind peers who they didn't want to have as partners in the questionnaire. The purpose of this line of inquiry was to determine if including students with mild disabilities would somehow set them up for failure, social seclusion, or targets for bullying. The comments that were related to science class, such as “they don't help you” and “they don't talk about science” were equally dispersed among students who did and did not choose students with disabilities as those they would not like to have as partners. However, two comments were more specific. One student wrote “[Student A with an IEP] just writes down answers after I figure them out”. Another student said “[Student B with an IEP] just waits for me to give him all of the answers and doesn't help”. These types of comments were only made towards students with disabilities. It is possible that if more teacher attention was given to structuring cooperative learning by assigning explicit roles for group members, providing more small group instruction, or just more monitoring of group work, an impact could be made on this perception of laziness which in reality could be a lack of clear, direct instruction or task difficulty.

Along these same lines, the questionnaire asked students whether or not it was hard to get partners to share the group work. This question was asked to determine if students without

disabilities felt that they had to complete most of the work during group work. The research stated that the acceptance and other positive effects of inclusion do not occur without being planned systematically (Shukla et al., 1998). Of the 37 students, 18 said it was hard to get their partners to share the work, while 14 said it was not hard. Four students chose to skip this question. Of the 18 students who stated that it was difficult, the majority of them said that their partners do not pay attention and just copy. Of the 14 who answered no, all of them said that it was because they were friends with their partners and they helped each other.

The triangulation of the interview material with observations revealed that the information was accurate. During observations, some partners shared more than others. Cooperation seemed to depend on the dyads formed. In one instance of random teacher pairing, one male student without special needs did not share his answers with a female student with a disability. At first one might assume that this was an example of a barrier to successful cooperation between students without disabilities to those with disabilities. However, this student talked about not cooperating because he did not like her, not because she did not pull her own weight on the assignment. Both of these students worked alone on their worksheet and got approximately the same grade.

Participants were asked about who they chose to partner with most often, in the questionnaire. This question intended to discover whether students without special needs often worked with students with disabilities. This question was also intended to be compared with a following question on the questionnaire asking students who they enjoyed having as partners. Only one student with an IEP in each class was named for the most common partner. Both of the students without disabilities who named students with disabilities as common partners also

named the same students as people they sit with at lunch. In 6th period, only two students did not name a peer that they had most often as partners. However, in 7th period, six students said that they did not know who was their most frequent partner. When observing, generally students were grouped randomly by the teacher or placed in groups based on proximity, therefore students did not have the same partner very often. This leads one to question that if more systematic partnering between students with and without disabilities could improve the chances of changing perceptions of students without disabilities about their peers with disabilities while at the same time nurturing cooperation and possibly friendships.

Another question on the questionnaire asked students to name one peer they liked to have as a partner. This question was included to be compared with the previous question discussed and to determine if students wanted to partner with their friends, students who received good grades, or if students avoided those with disabilities. Two out of eight students with disabilities, were named in the 7th period class by their peers without disabilities, while only one of five was named in the 6th period class. Only two of the participants with IEP's in this study chose other students with disabilities as their preferred partner. During observations, students rarely were allowed to choose their own group members. This only occurred once throughout the observation period. During this time, only two students with disabilities chose to be partners. This pair was formed because they were not actively seeking partners and were the only two students left. One student who chose a peer with an IEP as a preferred partner was asked why she liked being partners with this student during an interview. The student answered that she and her partner were "B.F.F.," meaning best friends forever. This student continued to mention planned sleepovers with the same student. This shows that this student, without a disability, built a

friendship outside of the classroom with a peer who was integrated in her science class.

### **Counting Off Groups**

Students were asked to name one good and one bad thing about group work during their questionnaire. This question was asked to determine the group dynamic in an inclusive classroom. Research suggests that when students with and without disabilities work together students without disabilities learn acceptance (Frederickson et al., 2007). Cushing and Kennedy (1997) found that students without disabilities improved their academic engagement when tutoring their peers with special needs. Both of the classes had very similar answers to both the advantages and disadvantages of group work. The students with disabilities described group work as “working together” and “getting to talk about what is an answer”. One student, without an IEP, who stated his preferred partner was a student with a disability wrote “You get to teach one another”. In fact, this seems to have an effect like Copeland et al. (2002) found where the students with disabilities are positive role models for their peers without disabilities. During observations this student with a disability who was chosen as a preferred partner by his peer without a disability was very interested in his work and put a lot of effort into the class. The students seemed to enjoy group work during observations, especially when they were able to work with their friends, because it allowed students to get out of their seats, converse, and become active learners rather than passive ones.

When students were asked to describe one bad thing about group work, there were several different answers. Some students said “nothing” while other students said “that people goof off when you are doing all the work”. Some students said that it got loud in the classroom and that fighting and arguments occurred. None of the students with disabilities said that their

peers made them do all the work. One student with an IEP said “One thing bad about group work is when one person goes on before you”. This student felt left behind when working in groups, which was also noted during observations. Another observation was the students only disliked group work when they were paired with students they did not like. Most of the students with disabilities were observed as being active group members and tried to contribute to their group. Typically group work was completed in pairs instead of small groups. An interesting observation was that group work was just that “group work”, and not cooperative learning. Research stated that for natural supports to work, some direct instruction must be given to student roles, interdependence, effective communication skills, individual accountability, and processing (Longwill & Kleinert, 1998).

During observations, dyads were chosen randomly by the general education teacher by pulling popsicle sticks out of a can, each with a student's name on them. When students were randomly placed in groups, students would often complain about their partners. The students were not observed saying anything degrading about other students related to disability category or intellectual capacity. As noted in the observational notes, students would complain about all random partners, with or without disabilities, unless they were placed with their friends. The teacher told students the reason for always randomly assigning partners was that they needed to learn how to get along and work with everyone. During the limited two weeks of observations, the teacher was not seen providing students with any suggestions or strategies to use in order to help students work better as a group.

Teacher supports for group work were not often observed during the inclusive science classroom. Lohrmann and Bambara (2006), discussed the importance for teachers to create an

environment where students feel comfortable asking for help. Also during observations in 6<sup>th</sup> period, a student identified with a disability got up and asked the general education teacher to read the question on the practice Ohio Achievement Test packet. Both students with and without disabilities were often observed raising their hands during 7<sup>th</sup> period to ask questions about assignments or content. Although the general education teacher would answer questions when they were called to her attention, she was not observed actively seeking to help her students during group work. During 6<sup>th</sup> period, a student with visual impairments had an aide who helped read, scribe, and copied necessary worksheets with large print and on yellow paper for easier reading. During observations, the paraprofessional would support the student with a visual impairment during group work but rarely was seen facilitating group work among the members of the group.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> period, the intervention specialist spent most of her time helping the students who have IEP's, however she was observed giving assistance to students without disabilities as well. The intervention specialist focused on helping students complete the assignments rather than teaching cooperative learning skills. On test days, the intervention specialist takes students with IEP's out of both 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> period to read the test to these students. Lohrmann and Bambara (2006) found collaboration to be a vital support for successful inclusion. The intervention specialist and the science teacher informally collaborated on Fridays or Mondays about what assignments were due and when upcoming tests were scheduled. Accommodations for assignments or lesson planning were not topics observed during their collaborations. The paraprofessional during 6<sup>th</sup> period would pick up materials from the teacher to copy to use with the student who has a visual impairment. However, there was little collaboration beyond just

social exchanges between the paraprofessional and general educator.

Downing and Peckham-Hardin (2007) suggested that supports for inclusive classrooms would actively engage students in the curriculum. Although active engagement was not often observed during the allotted research time, when participating in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> period science classes during student teaching I conducted three hands on activities during which collaboration occurred between the science teacher, the paraprofessional and me. Both the general educator and I engaged in active facilitation of small group working skills and social skills interaction during each lesson. This type of instruction was not observed during the time I was a passive observer.

### **Discussion and Implications for Practice**

This study was designed to examine whether there were benefits of inclusion for peers without disabilities in southeastern Ohio. The findings demonstrate that some students without disabilities accept and even consider themselves friends with their peers who have disabilities.

The following section provides a discussion of the questions that originally drove the study which centered around whether typical fifth grade students benefited from inclusion. They include: Are relationships formed between students with and without disabilities? Are there prejudices of students with disabilities held by their peers without disabilities? Did the inclusive classroom have peer supports? Were students with disabilities distracting their peers without disabilities in the classroom? Is academic achievement of peers without disabilities hindered by students with disabilities?

#### **Are relationships formed between students with and without disabilities?**

Relationships were examined via questionnaires, interviews and observations of students.

As mentioned in the previous section, the students without disabilities within the two classrooms studied reported having fairly diverse relationships, including both students with and without disabilities. As seen through the data in the results section titled Lend me a Helping Hand, students without special needs included peers with disabilities when naming their most common partner, their preferred partner, and those they would not like to have as partners. These results support Krajewski and Hyder's (2000) results, who found that students without disabilities grew more accepting the longer students with disabilities were included in their classroom. From the information gathered, the students without special needs at Lands Oak Middle School treated their peers with disabilities the same as their other classmates when answering the in-class partner related questions.

When students were asked to name a peer in the class they do not know well, only five students without disabilities named peers with disabilities. The students with disabilities that were named are students who are fairly withdrawn and as observed are not receiving any specific teacher support to network with those in their classes. The students were often noticed playing by themselves at recess or with students who were not in their class. Several of the peers without disabilities, who were also named as those not well known, were withdrawn in the classroom. In 6<sup>th</sup> period, the one student with a disability who was named as a peer students do not know well was the only student in the class who was pulled out for both mathematics and English in the morning. The limited time he was with his peers could be a reason he was not as well known in the class. However, all of the students with IEP's in 7<sup>th</sup> period science were pulled out for both math and English and it did not affect the questionnaire responses.

Every student with a disability had listed at least one student without a disability as

someone they sit with at lunch. This was very encouraging. This suggests that students with disabilities are friends with their peers without special needs and have gained friendships through their inclusive science class. One possible explanation for the data collected is that the students with disabilities are just as integrated as their peers without disabilities. Each student brings their own personality, strengths, and weaknesses to the classroom. Their disability does not seem to be affecting their ability to build social relationships with their peers without disabilities.

According to Carter and Kennedy (2006), general education students developed new friendships when placed in inclusive classrooms. However, as shown in the results section, students were indecisive when asked if they had made new friends during science. One possible reason is that students felt they made their friends during recess or lunch instead of actually during the science class, however their inclusive class might present more opportunities for friendships to grow if more systematic teacher interventions are applied. Another possible explanation is that students felt their friendships were already present, since they have had the same class of students since the beginning of the year and had other classes with the same students. This explanation would support the research of Vaughn et al. (1998) who found that students without disabilities showed an increase in friendship within a year, as time with their peers with disabilities increased.

### **Are there prejudices of students with disabilities held by their peers without disabilities?**

Name-calling was one way prejudices were examined at Lands Oak Middle School. On the questionnaire, several students called their peers, both with and without disabilities, several different names that were not based on intellectual capacity as seen in the results section. However during interviews, more derogatory terms connected to disabilities were used such as

“retard” and “idiot”. When students were asked to name peers who were called these names, they never mentioned a student with a disability and often said everyone in the classroom.

During both observation and responses to the questionnaires, students with and without disabilities were called names. This suggests that students with disabilities were not singled out as targets for name calling.

No specific prejudices were found when examining whether students without disabilities wanted to avoid students with disabilities when choosing partners. Three students with disabilities were named as preferred partners by their peers without disabilities. While only one student with a disability was named by his peers more than twice as someone they would not like having as a partner. Only four out of 13 students with disabilities were named as those their peers without disabilities would not like having as a partner. This suggests that students with disabilities were not avoided when choosing partners during academic work.

These results support the literature that inclusive classrooms create environments where peers without special needs become more accepting and more empathetic (Carter & Kennedy, 2006). Students without disabilities in inclusive classrooms were also shown to have a greater appreciation of diversity (Carter & Kennedy, 2006). Although the topic of the appreciation of diversity was not included in either the questionnaires or interviews, during observations students without disabilities did not tend to target students with disabilities with any greater ratio than any other peers in their class. In fact the interviews showed that students excluded peers on antisocial qualities such as immaturity, unfriendliness, or passive behaviors. One could then conclude that it was the specific antisocial behavior and not any one disability category or diversity attribute that was a target for social exclusion.

**Did the inclusive classroom have peer supports?**

Research has found that peer supports allows general education students to work with students with disabilities, implement appropriate strategies, and facilitate social interactions with their peers with disabilities (Haring & Breen, 1992). Other research also suggests that peers should help adapt classroom materials for students with disabilities (Longwill & Kleinert, 1998; Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Shukla et al.,1998). Peer tutoring has been a successful proven support system allowing students to help each other by modeling, practicing, and teaching (Zionts, 2005). During Lands Oak's 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> period inclusive science classrooms, students were often paired randomly by the general education teacher. Although supports were not included during these groupings, students with and without disabilities were able to work together. This gave opportunities for new relationships to grow during the inclusive classroom. However, the teacher was not observed systematically grouping students to compliment cooperative work. Also, during the limited observation time, the teacher was not seen teaching effective communication, facilitating social interactions, or assisting in the adaptation of materials. According to Haring and Breen (1992) successful interactions were shown if strategies for working with one another were taught and facilitated by instructors, or as in this case, if the teacher did some direct instruction or facilitation with the students on their science topic discussions. In addition, often content topics were not explained clearly to the students during observations and hands on activities rarely existed. Also the teacher was not observed assigning any specific group member roles to enhance task engagement. Reasons for this may be that the teacher had already discussed strategies with students, but during observations none of these elements were seen being reinforced.

Longwill and Kleinert's (1998) study required peer tutors to adapt classroom assignments. The general education students were not observed adapting assignments for their peers during this study. During 6<sup>th</sup> period, students were not given any specific instruction and often asked the teachers for help. Observations during 7<sup>th</sup> period showed a similar trend of limited teacher instruction on effective cooperative skills. Instead, the intervention specialist worked with students with disabilities on an individual basis. Modifications or adaptations to assignments were only observed during tests. Facilitation of techniques for adaptation to students without disabilities to use with their peers with disabilities was not observed. Reinforcing these skills within cooperative group work was also not seen. Since most of the students in this setting had only mild to moderate needs, perhaps implementing supports suggested by Longwill and Kleinert (1998) would not have been appropriate. However, making use of adaptations that are now seen as part of the universal design for learning could have benefits for all the students in this classroom and might enhance not only their achievement but their social-emotional skills and sense of belonging.

A condition that Haring and Breen (1992) found was students without disabilities could be trained through the use of the behavioral social support network strategy and help provide social interactions with their peers with disabilities. As shown in the results section, students without disabilities stated that they had social interactions inside and outside of the classroom with their peers with disabilities. Both students with and without disabilities were seen engaging in conversation with each other. However, unlike Haring and Breen's (1992) research, this was not teacher facilitated.

Researchers have determined collaboration between educators to be a necessary support

for successful inclusion (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006). In the observed classroom, the intervention specialist acted as an organizer and provided behavioral supports. The science classroom was considered a one teach, one support method of co-teaching. Because of the role the intervention specialist had in this classroom, collaboration was minimal. Due dates and upcoming events were the main concern for the intervention specialist. Adaptations or modifications for assignments did not occur and usually were not necessary for success in this class.

**Were students with disabilities distracting their peers without disabilities in the classroom?**

Students, without disabilities, in this classroom did not appear to be distracted by those with disabilities. Shukla et al. (1998) found that in an inclusive classroom, students with disabilities were found as a disruption to the class and monopolize the teacher's attention when the proper supports were not used. Although few peer supports were used in this inclusive classroom, such as random grouping and students discussing their answers with one another, other types of supports were provided for those with disabilities. A paraprofessional attended the 6<sup>th</sup> period class to provide supports for a student with a visual impairment. She scribed and read for the student when necessary and printed off worksheets in a larger print and on yellow paper. In the 7<sup>th</sup> period class, an intervention specialist attended and would discipline students with IEP's and help all students with assignments. She also would read tests to students with IEP's from 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> period science classes. At least for these two cases, their support needs did not require or monopolize the general education teacher's time.

Also, as described in the results section, students named peers without disabilities as those who got into trouble the most during science class. This suggests that students without

special needs do not notice those with disabilities being disciplined as much as their peers without disabilities. This observation would support the need for a general classroom management intervention and not any specific need only devoted to the students with disabilities. In both science classes, there were students without disabilities who were observed distracting their classmates. In 6<sup>th</sup> period, students with disabilities were not observed being disruptive, but in the 7<sup>th</sup> period class two students with disabilities were observed being distracting. One possible explanation for peers not mentioning these two students with IEP's as getting into trouble is the behavioral support given by the intervention specialist. These students with disabilities were not often disciplined publicly like their peers without special needs in their class. Students without disabilities may not have been aware that their peers with disabilities were being privately disciplined by the intervention specialist. Another possible assumption might be that students with disabilities do not distract their peers any more than their peers without disabilities. So within the context of this southeastern Ohio classroom, the assumption that inclusion of students with mild disabilities slows or distracts from the educational process was not seen.

Also of interest is the fact that general education students were named most often as those who their peers did not want as partners. Even though there was one student with a disability who was named several times by his peers without disabilities as unwanted, the data concerning this particular site did not support the idea that students with disabilities are often the target of exclusionary social practices by their peers without disabilities. This particular student was often reprimanded by his teacher for missing assignments and not being organized, leading this observer to consider that his support needs were not being met. In fact, this same student was

often observed imitating a peer without a disability, the one most often named by other students as one who gets into trouble the most often. If anything, this suggests the power of social learning for positive and negative behaviors, which lends support to the suggestion that the classroom distractions observed seemed to be a direct result of the lack of an effective general class behavior plan rather than a characteristic of classes engaged in the process of including students with disabilities.

### **Is academic achievement of peers without disabilities hindered by students with disabilities?**

While observing in the classroom, students without disabilities seemed to have the same opportunities for success as they would have if students with disabilities were excluded. Cushing and Kennedy (1997), found that students without disabilities increased their academic achievement by completing assignments, increasing their grades, and having better perceived classroom performance. Although this attribute was not assessed in either the questionnaire or the interviews, some observational data did point to some agreement. As seen in the results section, an extensive use of random pairing was used during these inclusive classrooms and was seen to be effective. Because students were not always grouped with the same ability levels, the random groupings gave all students the opportunity to experience different views, a crucial element in developing critical thinking skills and empathy. These observations lend support to Copeland et al. (2002) study, which found discussions in inclusive classrooms lead to unique viewpoints and experiences.

Some students with disabilities were seen giving their best effort during the inclusive science class, and thus provided a positive model of student behavior for all the students in the

classes. However, one incident was also noticed which stood in contrast to these observations. As mentioned in the results section, a student with a disability was often seen modeling after a disruptive general education student. Copeland et al. (2002), discussed that often times students with disabilities are good models to their peers without disabilities, but this classroom proved to have both good and bad models in both groups of students.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the present study extends the limited research about the benefits of peers without disabilities in an inclusive setting by looking to a specific cultural context to see if what has been written is being observed here. At Lands Oak Middle School, where students with mild to moderate disabilities were included in the classroom, students without disabilities reported having relationships with students with disabilities, preferring to partner with students with special needs, and not being distracted by their peers with disabilities to any greater degree than by their peers without disabilities. The classrooms were observed to be united and it was often difficult for the observer to single out the students with disabilities. Overall, based on the data, students were accepting of the diversity that their classroom presented. With these findings in mind, the following recommendations are posited for future researchers interested in the benefits for students without disabilities in inclusive classrooms.

One recommendation for future research would be to discover whether benefits of inclusion for peers without special needs are present in other areas of the state of Ohio or country. This would provide a larger population and allow results to be more widely accepted. Since this case study analyzed students in a partially inclusive setting and were pulled out for some courses, analyzing benefits of inclusion for students without disabilities with full inclusive

classrooms may shed light on important considerations when developing the best possible setting for both students with and without disabilities in an inclusive classroom. This may help to dispel the myth that the students without disabilities will be hampered or distracted in their learning process.

Analyzing grades, tests scores, and participation could be the next step in learning more about the academic benefits for peers without disabilities in an inclusive classroom. Research analyzing self perceptions may also be a beneficial technique to determine how general education peers feel about their own education. The present study focused more on social benefits than academic benefits. Research on the academic benefits of students without disabilities in inclusive classrooms, especially increasing abilities to use critical thinking, might help promote inclusive classrooms and increase support for inclusion among parents, teachers, and administrators as they gain a better understanding of the importance of inclusion as a reform for all and not just a reform for those students with disabilities.

Further research may also focus on different teaching methods and teacher facilitation techniques of support systems in inclusive settings as well as trying to distinguish which ones work best within specific social and academic contexts. Through this type of analysis, teachers might find tips on best practice and on strategies to use in their inclusive classrooms. General education teachers might also be given guidance on how to best integrate an intervention specialist into their classroom.

As noted, only six interviews took place in this study, leaving room to discover more insight into the friendships and classroom dynamic that was present in this inclusive classroom. Different classrooms in the same school could be analyzed to determine if the benefits are seen

school wide rather than simply in one classroom. Overall, a larger sampling of districts throughout the state and a wider range of participants would expand the research and show possible connections between social and academic benefits for students without disabilities in an inclusive classroom.

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## Appendix A

### Ohio University Consent Form

Title of Research: *Social Relationships in the Classroom*

Your child is being asked to participate in a research project conducted by an Ohio University graduate student who was a previous student teacher in your child's class. For you to be able to decide whether you want your child to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your child to participate in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

### Explanation of Study

This study is to receive feedback from students on classroom strategies and determine any impacts that friendships and peer relationships of fifth grade students have on designing and doing group work in class. The information your child will share could help educators teach in more effective ways and use group work and cooperative learning in more interesting ways for students.

If you agree to have your child participate, your child will be asked to complete a one page questionnaire. A few selected students may also be asked to be interviewed.

Your child will participate in a questionnaire during one class period and may be asked to participate in a thirty minute interview during a second class period to elaborate on the answers given in the questionnaire. All of your child's responses will be completely confidential and will only be known to the researcher.

### Risks and Discomforts

No risks or discomforts are anticipated. If the student is uncomfortable in any way during either the questionnaire or interview, the student will not be asked to participate. They will also be told that they may stop the interview at any time they want.

### Benefits

This study is important to science/society because it will allow teachers to form groups and promote social skills training by using cooperative learning in more effective ways in the classroom with the data collected from students themselves.

## Confidentiality and Records

The information collected in the process of conducting this study will be kept confidential by using codes instead of names during the questionnaires. The identity of the student will only be known by the researcher and will be destroyed after data is collected.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep this information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:

- \* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
- \* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU

## Contact Information

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Kelli Turnbull at (740)-358-1501.

If you have any questions regarding your child's rights or rights as a parent of the participant please contact Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:

- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
- you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction.
- you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study
- you are 18 years of age or older
- your participation in this research is completely voluntary
- you may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

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

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

Version Date: *[insert 03/16/10]*

**Appendix B**

Survey Questions

Kelli Turnbull  
(740)-358-1501  
[kt119104@ohio.edu](mailto:kt119104@ohio.edu)

Name 4 people that you sit with at lunch:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

In Science, who is your partner most often?

Who do you want to be partners with?

Name two people you would not like to be partners with?

- 1.
- 2.

Why do you not like being partners with these people?

Have you made any new friends while in Science?

Name a student in class you do not know very well.

What is one good thing about group work?

What is one bad thing about group work?

Is it difficult to get partners to share the work? Why or Why not?

**Appendix C**

Interview Questions:

Do you hear people calling others names during science? What names do you hear?  
What student(s) do they often call these names?

In class, are there students who get into trouble a lot? Who are these students? Why do you think this is?

(Based on Survey Responses) Are there students you do not feel like you know very well? Why is this? Would you like to get to know them? Why or why not?

Other questions may follow based on the answers from the questionnaire. The questions will be related to those asked on the questionnaire.