Moving Toward Inclusive Practices

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors describe a change model that was developed and implemented over 3 years in 2 southern California school districts to promote inclusive practices. A study documented the change process and the impact of related district and site activities through interviews with general and special educators, administrators, and parents. Findings from the study indicate that all sites moved toward inclusive practices, with the participants reporting benefits for students with disabilities, the general education student population, and educational practices of general and special educators. Approaches in implementing inclusive practices differed, however, resulting in significant variability among schools in services provided to students with special needs. Implications in moving toward inclusive practices are discussed, including factors perceived as contributing to the change process, the configuration of services provided, and issues related to sustaining inclusive efforts. The data suggest the complexity of change and the diversity of programs that emerge from a common model of change. Balancing inclusion with specialized instruction for all students emerged as an important component of inclusive practices.

SCHOOL SYSTEMS THROUGHOUT THE NATION ARE moving toward inclusive practices, educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms (McLeskey, Henry, & Hodges, 1998; Putnam, Spiegel, & Bruniinks, 1995). The term inclusion specifically refers to the “process and practice of educating students with disabilities in the general education classroom of their neighborhood school . . . with the supports and accommodations needed” (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, 1995, pp. 2–3). The intention is to alter education for all students, benefiting not only students with disabilities but also those without disabilities (Ferguson, 1996).

The percentage of students with disabilities served in general education classrooms has risen steadily. Specifically, in 1998–1999, 47% of students with disabilities were educated for 79% or more of the school day in general education settings, which is almost double the percentage served in the 1984–1985 school year. More than 95% of these students were educated in general education school buildings (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Although students with disabilities have increasingly had access to general education classes, reports concerning the effectiveness of practices associated with inclusion have been mixed (Kavale & Forness, 2000), leading researchers to question whether and how inclusive practices are actually being implemented. Consistently, the evidence has suggested that general education teachers feel unprepared to serve students with disabilities, have little time available to collaborate, and make few accommodations for students with special needs (Baker & Zigmond, 1995; Manset & Semmel, 1997; Pivik, McComas, & LaFlamme, 2002; Schumm & Vaughn, 1995; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Tapasak & Walther-Thomas, 1999). Given inconclusive findings regarding the effectiveness of inclusive practices, researchers have argued that educators should focus on identifying successful inclusive service delivery arrangements and practices that promote inclusion rather than the indiscriminate implementation of a full inclusion policy (Fennick & Liddy, 2001; Kavale & Forness, 2000; King-Sears & Cummings, 1996).

The literature suggests that successful inclusive schools provide a unified educational system in which general and special educators work collaboratively to provide compre-
hensive and integrated services and programming for all students. At these sites, inclusive practices have been carefully developed and implemented, with resources provided to support and maintain change (Burello, Lashley, & Beatty, 2001; Larrivee, Semmel, & Gerber, 1997; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002; Vaughn & Schumm, 1995; Villa, Thousand, Meyers, & Nevin, 1996). As with any innovation or educational reform effort, the successful inclusion of students with disabilities requires fundamental change in the organizational structures of schools and in the roles and responsibilities of teachers. Change in schools can be difficult, however, given school structures that promote traditional practices and provide little support for innovation (Bullough, 1995; Klinger, Arguelles, Hughes, & Vaughn, 2001; McLeskey & Waldron, 2000; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Like other organizations, the school culture has a set of strongly embedded assumptions, values, and customs that encourage maintenance of the status quo (Evans, 1993). For example, Pechman and King (1993) found in a restructuring effort of six middle-grade schools that “even with the most careful structures and well-intentioned plans for change, old habits and ingrained attitudes about schools and teaching, entrenched bureaucracies, and outmoded leadership styles die hard” (p. vi).

Given the challenges of school reform, many researchers have focused on identifying ways to promote school change. As a result, there is a growing body of research that provides insight into the change process (Fullan, 1991, 2001; McAdams, 1997; Moffett, 2000; Shields & Knapp, 1997; Wagner, 2001), and it has been helpful in promoting inclusive practices (Fisher, Sax, & Grove, 2000; Vaughn & Schumm, 1995). Consistently, researchers have noted that findings have identified strategies that promote reform, including building a commitment for change, planning for change, preparing personnel for change, and providing supports that promote and maintain change. Research supporting each of these strategies is summarized in this article.

BUILDING A COMMITMENT FOR CHANGE

A major challenge in the change process is building a commitment to change by the persons who will serve as the change agents (Evans, 1993; Wagner, 2001). Because teachers are guided by their values, beliefs, and attitudes toward change, they must be convinced that a particular change is worthwhile and understand the reasons for it. Developing a common understanding and a shared vision for change facilitates this process (Anderson, 1993; Schalock, Fredericks, Dalke, & Alberto, 1994; Villa & Thousand, 1995; Wagner, 2001).

PLANNING FOR CHANGE

Efforts to change school practices often fail when methods used to manage reform consist of autocratic, or top-down, approaches. More effective are school-based programs that encourage the participation of teachers in planning and decision-making (Fullan, 2001; Jenkins, Ronk, Schrag, Rude, & Stowitschek, 1994). Specifically, when change is school based, programs are tailored to the characteristics and strengths of school sites. Moreover, school-based programs take advantage of the individual talents and involvement of teachers in meeting the needs of the students and families they serve (Vaughn & Schumm, 1995).

PREPARING PERSONNEL FOR CHANGE

Considerable evidence has indicated that both general and special educators feel inadequately prepared to serve students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Specifically, in numerous surveys, teachers have reported that they have insufficient skills and training to adequately serve students with special needs (Houck & Rogers, 1994; Lieber et al., 2000; Schumm & Vaughn, 1991; Schumm et al., 1995; Semmel, Abernathy, Butera, & Lesar, 1991). To facilitate confidence and competence, teachers need systematic and intensive training that includes research-based best practices in inclusive schools. Moreover, critical to sustained change is staff development that is ongoing and participatory, for example, establishing study groups, teacher collaboratives, and long-term partnerships (Little, 1993; Wenitzky, Stoddart, & O’Keefe, 1992).

PROVIDING SUPPORTS THAT PROMOTE AND MAINTAIN CHANGE

Although teachers and other school district personnel may initially be enthusiastic about change, sustaining the change process is often difficult. Change in school practices requires strong support systems containing key personnel and resources committed to the change process (Fullan, 2001; McLeskey & Waldron, 2000; Wagner, 2001). First, administrative support, at both district and school levels, is critical, particularly in changing organizational structures of schools to promote inclusive practices (Villa et al., 1996). Second, resources are needed to support the substantial efforts of district staff in reorganization, internal coordination, and shared planning (Fullan, 2001; Miles & Louis, 1990; Wagner, 1993). Teachers have consistently reported lack of support as the key barrier to successful inclusion, noting concerns regarding time, training, personnel, materials, class size, and severity of disabilities (Deno, Foegen, Robinson, & Espin, 1996; McLeskey & Waldron, 2000; Roach, 1995; Vaughn & Schumm, 1995).

School reform in general is challenging, and inclusion is one of the more complex changes within educational reform (Fullan, 1991; Fullan & Miles, 1992; McLeskey & Pugach, 1995). For example, Kavale and Forness (2000) emphasized...
That “inclusion is not something that simply happens, but something that requires careful thought and preparation . . . implemented with proper attitudes, accommodations, and adaptations in place” (p. 287). The stage must be set to restructure schools for inclusion (Mamlin, 1999; Schumm & Vaughn, 1995); however, little is known about how schools move toward inclusive practices or about the factors that support and facilitate this process.

In this article, we describe a 3-year project to facilitate inclusive education that was designed as a state-wide partnership involving the California Department of Education, institutions of higher education, and selected school districts. A change model based on the school reform research that was previously discussed was adopted to move schools toward inclusive practices. In this article, we examine the model and describe the movement of schools toward inclusive practices, investigating four research questions:

1. What changes occurred at schools?
2. How satisfied were school personnel and parents with change?
3. What factors influenced school change?
4. What were the concerns of participants regarding school change?

METHOD

Participants

A university and two school districts were involved in the project. The university was a state institution in southern California with more than 25,000 students and a large teacher preparation program in special education. From the two school districts, nine schools—five elementary schools and one middle school in one district and two elementary schools and one middle school in the other district—were involved. One district served approximately 18,000 students, the other served 22,000 students. The minority student population, 25% in one district and 35% in the other, was primarily from Hispanic or Asian backgrounds, and approximately 10% to 15% of these students were English language learners. Each school district served a little more than 2,000 students with disabilities.

Study participants were general and special educators, administrators, and parents of students with disabilities from each participating school. Interviews were completed with approximately 90 individuals: 25 special educators, 44 general educators, 6 administrators, and 24 parents.

Procedure

When the project began, the participating school districts used traditional methods to provide special education services for elementary and secondary students; that is, students needing special education services for less than 50% of the day were taught by resource specialists in pull-out programs. Students with more severe needs were placed in self-contained special education classes and were involved in inclusive settings primarily for nonacademic activities, such as recess and lunch. Students with the most severe disabilities were often placed at segregated sites for special education students or at general education campuses in segregated wings designated for special education classes. Students receiving resource specialist services typically were educated at the neighborhood school. Other students often did not have that option because self-contained classes frequently were clustered at specific school sites. Programs were separate and distinct, with little collaboration among general and special educators or among special day class and resource specialist teachers.

Teachers reported, however, that the impetus for change had already been occurring at the schools prior to the introduction of the project. First, parents were beginning to request that students with moderate or severe disabilities be fully included in general education. Second, some general and special education teachers were experimenting with collaborative models for students with mild or moderate disabilities. Finally, district leadership encouraged changes in service delivery models. For example, in one district, a vision of more inclusive and collaborative practices had already been developed through task forces of general and special educators and parents. Although the other district had done little to systematically support change, several individuals in leadership roles were strong supporters of inclusion and had actively pursued participation in the project. Much of the initial impetus for change thus came from a variety of sources: parents asking for change, teachers interested in change, and district administrative personnel supporting change. This core group set the stage for facilitating the process.

We developed strategies and activities to move schools toward more inclusive practices based on the literature review of school change and organized around the change model. These strategies and activities are summarized in Table 1 and described next.

Building a Commitment for Change. To build a commitment for change, district personnel met to discuss the goals of the project and the need for change. Several initial meetings focused on the “why” of inclusion, discussing research-based reports of student outcomes. Teachers were then given opportunities to visit classrooms and programs where they could observe best practices in inclusive education. As they became increasingly convinced of the benefits of inclusion, these teachers began to plan for change, developing ownership of the idea and deepening their commitment to inclusive practices.

Planning for Change. With an understanding that the involvement of teachers is critical in the change process, the
project staff members worked collaboratively with teachers in both districts to (a) develop a vision of inclusive practices, (b) examine and identify district needs for inclusive practices, (c) establish goals to implement inclusive practices, and (d) develop a strategic plan to move toward inclusive practices. Although the timeline varied within each district, planning for change took most of the first year of the project, with each phase completed in 2 to 3 months.

First, participants discussed the purpose of the project, developing a common understanding of the project goals. As a result of these discussions, they developed a shared vision for the project stating that participants were committed to “reflect upon, redesign, and evaluate efforts to effectively meet the needs of all learners in inclusive educational environments.”

A period of self-examination next took place, with personnel from each school district meeting to assess the extent to which existing practices reflected the project vision. Participants in both districts were general and special education teachers, support service providers, parents, principals, and other district personnel. As a result of these discussions, existing practices and district needs were clarified.

From the self-examination phase, the project moved to establishing goals. District leadership teams, assisted by facilitators from the university, examined self-evaluation data across levels and sites, synthesized these data, and established priorities. One district that was more centralized in its approach selected school representatives who worked together to develop district goals and activities. The other district, reflecting a more decentralized approach, had teams from each school develop plans that were then reviewed for common goals and themes across the district.

Once goals were established, leadership teams in each district developed plans for project implementation. This process required building a consensus to reflect the interests of participants at both site and district levels. Each district developed a plan that included goals, activities, a timeline, personnel responsible, and a budget. Through ongoing participation, district personnel developed ownership in the proposed changes, deepening their commitment to inclusive practices.

Preparing for Change. In preparation for change, the teams developed plans that identified district-wide staff development goals and activities to be implemented at individual sites. Districts formed committees/task forces to plan training activities. Plans involved attending state and district professional development seminars, visiting other sites within the region and other regions, and using district resources to support inclusive efforts. As liaisons to each of the districts, university faculty members served as consultants and provided technical assistance and ongoing support in the implementation of project activities.

Toward the end of the first year, and in the second year, districts began to implement the planned activities. Both of the districts offered staff development opportunities that oriented personnel to the goals of the project. For example, in one school district, teams of general and special educators from each participating school met to address the following district goals:

- All students will be educated in their neighborhood schools to the maximum extent possible.
- Full inclusion will be an option on the continuum of options available to students.
- Service delivery will become more collaborative.
- Special day class programs will become more noncategorical.
- There will be ongoing staff development to support general and special education staff.
- There will be a revised IEP and a system for determining student progress.

In the other school district, school teams met separately, with individualized goals developed at each school site. In addition, school teams of general and special educators enrolled in 3- to 5-day professional development institutes on collaboration and inclusive education offered by the California Department of Education.

Professional development activities initially focused on the rationale for inclusion and on models and strategies to reorganize services for students with disabilities. Staff devel-

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**TABLE 1. Model for Change**

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<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Activities used to promote change</th>
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<tr>
<td>Building a commitment to change</td>
<td>• Provide leadership for change</td>
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<td>• Understand the need for inclusive practices</td>
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<td>• Observe inclusive models</td>
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<td>Planning for change</td>
<td>• Develop a vision of inclusive practices</td>
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<td>• Engage in self-examination, identify needs</td>
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<td>• Establish goals</td>
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<td>• Develop a strategic plan</td>
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<td>Preparing for change</td>
<td>• Participate in professional development</td>
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<td>• Provide technical assistance in classrooms</td>
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<td>Supporting change</td>
<td>• Sustain administrative support</td>
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<td>• Allocate resources as needed</td>
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opment continued throughout the project but changed in focus, moving from the “why” of inclusion to knowledge on “how” to implement inclusive practices. In one district, a training manual was developed and used to guide faculty meetings. It contained material on the following topics: the rationale for change and models for including students with disabilities in general education, development of a vision for the least restrictive environment, methods of assessment for collaborative classrooms, systems designed to facilitate collaboration and teaming among general and special educators, teaching responsive to student diversity, and adaptation/ modification of curriculum in various content areas. In each district, the focus was on empowering school teams to develop and implement a plan that would move schools toward inclusive practices.

**Supporting Change.** Fortunately, each school district had key administrators at both the district and school levels who supported reform efforts. In addition, the project provided financial assistance to support change. For instance, in Year 2 of the project, funds were used primarily for district-wide planning time and staff development. In Year 3, support was concentrated at selected “intensity of effort” schools that had the potential to serve as demonstration sites for inclusive practices. Each of these sites was required to write a plan describing the goals, activities, and use of funds. The emphasis during the final year of the project was at the school level, with evaluation focusing on change at school sites.

**Data Collection**

In order to document the change process and the impact of related district and site activities, individual and focus group interviews were conducted in elementary and middle schools participating as intensity-of-effort sites in the two districts. Teacher, administrator, and parent interview protocols were developed for this study (see the Appendix). Each interview protocol focused on questions related to changes in students’ services, satisfaction with changes, factors that influenced school change, and participants’ concerns. Interview protocols were piloted with a few teachers, administrators, and parents to provide validation of the protocol content and feedback regarding the wording of questions and the time taken to complete the interview. Based on feedback, minor changes were made to enhance clarity in administering the interview and in the wording of interview questions. The interviewers were (a) the project evaluator and coordinator and (b) faculty liaisons who interviewed in districts in which they were not the liaison. Interviewers met initially to review the interview protocol and to systematize procedures in conducting interviews.

Within each school, interviews were conducted separately for administrators, general educators, special educators, and parents. Administrators were interviewed individually, with the interview lasting approximately 30 minutes; all others were interviewed as groups, and the interviews lasted approximately 1 hour. Group size typically ranged from 4 to 6 individuals.

**Data Analysis**

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Two of the authors read the transcripts and analyzed data inductively by using categorical coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The data were categorized into broad areas, with quotes and examples highlighted that supported each category. The two researchers conferred to compare responses and to further revise and resolve differences in coding, with agreements and disagreements recorded to check on intercoder reliability. Separate notes were maintained on emerging themes for trends and patterns within and across schools and districts. A second level of analysis involved categorizing themes according to the four research questions. Finally, data were analyzed to examine consistency and differences among general and special educators, administrators, and parents.

**Results**

Data from the focus group interviews indicated that all schools moved toward inclusive practices. Approaches to inclusive education differed, however, resulting in significant variability among schools in the services provided to students with special needs.

**Movement Toward Inclusive Practices**

Three approaches emerged during the move toward inclusive practices. First, in some schools, services were restructured so that students with disabilities were served only in general education classrooms. In several schools, special education classes were completely eliminated, with special day class and resource specialists sharing caseloads according to grade level. Special and general educators formed collaborative teams, sharing students, team teaching, and grouping according to need rather than label. For example, in one elementary school, the resource specialist teamed with two general education teachers who had combined classes of (a) fourth and fifth graders and (b) fifth and sixth graders. The teachers collectively planned the curriculum and grouping arrangements. At another elementary school, a two-thirds special day class was combined with a second-grade class. The 36 general education students and 12 special education students worked together in one large classroom created by literally removing the wall between the two classes. The teachers planned together to develop a schedule that combined co-taught whole-group and small-group rotations.

At a middle school, all students receiving special education services were placed in general education classes. Each
special educator, working on a team with general educators, had a grade-level assignment and supported a specific group of students with special education needs at that grade level. General educators planned and implemented the curriculum, and special educators provided support to students with and without disabilities who needed assistance. This support took several forms—providing brief individual assistance during independent or group work time, pulling a small group aside for reteaching, or working with the general educators to adapt assignments.

Second, schools modified services, continuing to educate students in separate special education settings but also increasing opportunities for inclusion in general education. In these schools, teachers and their assistants rotated into general education classes. They also increased their support to students without disabilities. For example, at an elementary school, the special education teachers continued to provide services to students with disabilities in their own separate classrooms but also added students without disabilities to these classes. A teacher who had modified services described the class as “a revolving door,” with students coming and going. Assistants were used primarily to support students with disabilities in general education classes, and special educators provided support through consultation and cooperative teaching.

At a middle school, students with severe disabilities who had previously been housed in a separate wing of the school were included in classes throughout the campus. Reflecting on the change, one administrator explained, “Previously, you never saw them; they never came to an assembly, many teachers had never been over to the building, and special educators never went to faculty meetings.”

Teachers and administrators discussed how these service delivery changes altered the image of special education in their school. One special educator stated, “The general education students don’t see me as a special education teacher. It’s just pleasant to walk across the school yard and have general education students greet you; that has never happened before.” As one administrator described the change: “We are servicing kids in different ways; we’re looking at who is on campus and how can we best meet their needs.”

Finally, some schools expanded services to support additional students, either individuals with severe disabilities or students who were not identified for special education services but were struggling in general education classes. Students with severe disabilities who had previously attended segregated sites were typically supported in general education by a full-inclusion specialist teacher and one-on-one assistants. One school began the project with one fully included student. By the 3rd year, four students with severe disabilities—one each in kindergarten through third grade—were served at the site. Describing this change, the administrator said, “General education teachers are working with students that were previously not at this school. The boxes of general and special education are blurred, broken down.”

In many of the schools, services were expanded to support students in general education. Special educators frequently assisted small groups of students, with and without disabilities, who needed extra help in the general education classroom. In several schools, a Homework Club was initiated by the special education teacher, with students invited for the last half-hour of the day to get help with homework. Another school change benefiting all students was “Fix and Finish,” in which a room would be open at recess and lunch and staffed with special educators and their assistants on an alternating basis to help any student. At another elementary school, a special educator offered a study skills program for fifth and sixth graders. A middle school offered a tutorial period that was led by a special educator and attended by students with disabilities and others referred by their teachers. Parents reported that the students referred to this class as the “smart class” where anybody could go to learn how to study. As a result of these expanded roles, special educators attended to the needs of the entire school population.

Satisfaction with Change

During the interviews, principals, teachers, and parents discussed their satisfaction with changes made toward inclusive practices. Overall, they were pleased, describing how inclusive practices benefited students with disabilities, the general education student population, and the educational practices of general and special educators.

Educators and parents reported that students with disabilities benefited from being included because they were exposed to age-appropriate curricula and worked with and learned from typical peers. In elementary schools, both general and special education teachers made statements such as, “The youngsters are more challenged,” “They have better role models,” “They have the opportunity to mix with normal kids of their own age,” “Their behavior changed.” Similarly, both general and special education teachers at the middle school level were supportive of inclusive practices, noting that behavior problems dropped and were no more noticeable or disruptive than those of the students in general education. One special educator said, “Before, substitute teachers wouldn’t come in because of the behavior . . . behavior problems still exist, but teachers feel supported by the team to get assistance if it is needed.” A middle school principal reported that prior to integration, he used to know all the students with disabilities by name because of disciplinary referrals to him. “Now they are no longer ‘frequent visitors’ to my office; their behavior is more like that of other students.”

Like teachers, parents of children with and without disabilities were supportive of the changes, often comparing their children’s current and previous school experiences. One parent of a child in elementary school described the stigma of special education classrooms: “The previous school made him feel like an oddball . . . he doesn’t feel that anymore. . . . They used to bring them all out to one classroom . . . it made
them all feel like misfits.” With inclusion, a parent indicated that “children feel like others, their self-esteem has improved, and expectations have been raised for all children.” At the middle school level, the parents were equally supportive of inclusive practices. One parent commented, “The kids are not singled out; support is provided for any kid who needs it.” Based on interview data, it was clear that both teachers and parents reported that students with disabilities did not want to return to self-contained classes, that they saw themselves as full members of the student body.

Teachers and parents indicated that students without disabilities also benefited from inclusive practices. They noted an improvement in school climate, with students learning to appreciate differences and taking pride in assisting others. A general education teacher stated that students without disabilities gained a whole new set of social priorities; overall, the students were more caring and compassionate. The general education student population also benefited academically from the variety of teaching methods and supports provided through inclusive practices. For example, one parent talked about how the teacher had implemented teaching strategies for her daughter’s benefit and the teacher later shared with her that many other children had benefited as well. Both general and special educators indicated that students without disabilities had more opportunities to be leaders and mentors on behalf of students with disabilities in the class. Moreover, teachers and parents noted the additional assistance available for students in general education who did not qualify for special education services.

Recognizing the benefits to students, both general and special educators were increasingly supportive of inclusive practices over time. This change in attitudes was noted by a principal: “Those who were formerly neutral are now positive, and those who were negative are now neutral.” Parents reported that the attitudes of general educators toward students with special needs improved through their contact with special educators. Perhaps most important in changing attitudes, however, was the contact general educators had with students with disabilities. As one general educator said, “They came to life in other areas that you never thought they would; in science, they are the stars. They are really good at hands-on activities.” The perceptions of general educators regarding inclusive practices thus were influenced by their contact with special educators and their classroom experiences with students with disabilities.

With changing attitudes, special educators reported feeling more a part of the school faculty and were included in the full range of staff development opportunities available to general educators. Through contact with the general educators, they became more aware of the general education curriculum and expectations and better prepared to assist students in becoming a part of the whole school community. They also reported feeling renewed and stimulated by the change in teaching responsibilities. For example, a teacher from a special day class emphasized, “I was never in a general education room in 20 years. I never taught a general education kid. Bringing general education kids into my daily life has been my salvation.”

In summary, inclusive practices were viewed as not only benefiting students with disabilities but contributing to a caring and supportive school environment for all students and faculty. Students without disabilities benefited from the alternative teaching methods and additional support in the classroom. Special educators developed relationships with general educators, were appreciated for their support and specialized skills, and became more aware of the expectations and curriculum for the general school population. General educators developed skills in serving students with special needs and valued the special educators’ expertise and assistance in their classrooms. Overall, inclusive practices promoted teacher interaction, articulation, and collaboration that resulted in teachers and students working as an integrated team.

**Practices That Promoted Change**

During the focus group interviews, school personnel and parents discussed factors that supported the movement toward inclusive practices. Although the individual schools differed in implementation, five key factors emerged across schools that contributed to change: leadership, teacher commitment, staff development, planning time, and classroom support.

The overall impetus for change initially came from leadership at the state and district levels. As one teacher reported, “We knew it was coming, were kind of told to change, and said we might as well do it.” On the other hand, district personnel reported that “if the [project] hadn’t come, we still would have not done this.” In other words, the project provided the initial support for change. Consistently, general and special education teachers talked about the principals’ support in providing vision and guidance during the change process. For example, one principal emphasized the need to “cross the lines” so that general and special educators could work together. Another principal indicated that her participation was important to the development of teacher commitment: “I was actively involved in orchestrating team meetings. This hands-on approach made a huge statement to teachers . . . that this is an important project, she’s devoting half a day . . . it meant a lot to them.” Finally, principals were seen as an important source of support in attaining resources: “She began demanding the need for supports. . . . took a full year of prodding, but we finally have the support we really needed . . . she fights for us.”

Participants also reported that change was influenced by committed teachers. Some schools had new personnel who had preparation and experience in inclusive classrooms. Others were veterans who were dissatisfied with the existing service delivery model and were interested in change. A core group of teachers often began the implementation of inclusive practices. Once this core group demonstrated success, other teachers became interested in participating, and teacher
involvement increased. On the other hand, at some schools, teachers noted difficulty in finding a partner willing to become involved in a cooperative or collaborative teaching environment. The development of inclusive practices therefore was often dependent upon the availability of teachers who were able and willing to work together.

Professional development activities supported by the project assisted teachers in change efforts. Principals and teachers pointed out that inservices were helpful in establishing a comfort level with inclusive practices, and teachers appreciated state and district workshops and conferences, particularly those that provided specific strategies for including students with disabilities in general education classes. With increased collaboration, special educators who previously met only with other special educators were included in grade-level and content-area teams and attended staff development sessions that related to curricula and teaching strategies.

A consistent theme in focus group interviews at the elementary and middle schools was the importance of collaborative planning time. The specific use of this time differed in individual schools, but the importance of time to communicate was seen as an essential feature in all schools. In one school, general and special education teachers met monthly on a rotating schedule to collaboratively plan and implement practices that fostered the inclusion and support of students with special needs. Substitute teachers were hired to “float” so that teachers could meet together. As reported by one teacher, “The planning sessions have recently focused on providing support in the primary grades for children at-risk. Traditionally, we don’t identify kids until second grade. We want to change that philosophy and attitude by catching them early.” At first, these meetings involved planning for change and then implementing change, but most schools continued to hold collaborative planning meetings throughout the project, thus facilitating communication.

Finally, throughout the interviews, teachers emphasized that the classroom support they received was critical. Several teachers talked about efforts to include students prior to the project. One special education teacher shared an unsuccessful experience with a boy who had a severe behavior problem and was included without full supports: “They tried to move the kid out [of special education] again this year along with full support, and it has worked out a lot better.”

Concerns Regarding School Change

Although respondents did not express dissatisfaction with the described changes, there were concerns among school personnel and parents regarding how to sustain and continue these efforts. A predominant theme throughout the interviews was whether supports provided by the project would continue once the project ended. A second theme was the need to address the changing roles of teachers and schools implementing inclusive practices.

Concerns during interviews focused primarily on continued support for collaborative planning time and staff development, activities that were supported, in part, by the project. Teachers recognized that collaborative planning was critical to the success of inclusive practices and indicated that planning among general and special educators needed to be not only continued but also expanded to include planning and consultation time with aides. They also recognized the importance of continued staff development, especially in preparing general educators to serve students with disabilities: “They should receive a lot more training, bit by bit, as necessary. In this way, teachers can slowly learn certain skills that they could use in their classroom and adapt as necessary.” Teachers also discussed the importance of expanding staff development to school personnel not initially involved but who needed to “buy in” to the model. For example, a special day class teacher talked about teachers who hadn’t changed “one iota in willingness to participate. . . . They think more in and out—out of hers and into mine.” Thus, although many school-wide changes had occurred, teachers were concerned that without continued staff development, it would be difficult to sustain and expand inclusion. Supports initially provided by the project were seen as essential in the continuation and expansion of inclusive education.

With increased numbers of special education students in general education classrooms and project schools, new challenges emerged regarding the delivery of services for all students. First, teachers emphasized the need to address the increasing caseloads of special educators. They were concerned about the “thin level of service” and believed more aids and special educators were needed. With increasing numbers of students being included, caseloads of special educators increased, causing difficulties in scheduling services and providing appropriate supports. As one teacher lamented, “There are so many positives [with full inclusion], . . . but it has to be supported; unsupported full inclusion is worse than no full inclusion at all.” A second challenge was the increased classroom demands on general educators. Teachers seemed positive about additional assistance in classrooms, but they were also concerned about additional bodies and a greater noise level. Many teachers noted class size as contributing to the problem: “The ability of a teacher to accommodate to students’ individual needs is limited in classes with 30 students.” With large class sizes, increasing demands on their time, and fewer resources, the teachers questioned whether the innovative practices developed, as well as the resulting benefits to students, could be sustained. There was concern that the specialized and often extensive instruction required by students with disabilities not be compromised.

Finally, teachers questioned the concentration of special education students in a few classes. This led to the perception that these classes were being assigned a “lower track” of students and students with more behavior problems. As one general educator pointed out, “Grouping all of the special

Concerns Regarding School Change

...
education kids in one class is not good. It creates a subcommunity of nonlearners. They have no incentive to change since so many of their classmates are not able to do the work.”

General educators agreed that clustering students with disabilities in a limited number of general education classes was a mistake. They believed these students should be distributed among school personnel to provide more heterogeneous grouping in all classrooms. However, with students distributed across classes, it was difficult to schedule adequate time to provide the special education services needed. The issue of grouping to optimize student performance and support remained unresolved. A related concern was the concentration of students with disabilities in the project schools, given their growing reputation for inclusive practices. Teachers argued that students should be returned to neighborhood schools. They felt this would decrease the volume of special education students at some schools and provide an incentive for others to adopt a more inclusive model.

**DISCUSSION**

In this article, we have described a 3-year project designed to promote change toward inclusive practices in two southern California school districts. Strategies and activities to assist in this process were based upon a model of change in the reform literature. Results indicated that all sites increased inclusive practices, with participants highly satisfied with reported changes but concerned about the ability to sustain them. Findings regarding factors perceived as contributing to the change process, the configuration of services provided, and issues related to sustaining inclusive efforts will be discussed in terms of implications for others moving toward inclusive practices.

**The Change Process**

The change model that the school districts adopted provided a general framework for organizing project activities. It included building a commitment to change, planning for change, preparing school personnel for change, and providing support for change. The study results supported the overall efficacy of the model, and the interviews identified specific factors that influenced changes in service delivery. First, participants reported that staff development was critical to the change process, providing the motivation and preparation for inclusion. General and special education school personnel learned the “why” of inclusive education, which promoted teacher commitment, and the “how,” which gave teachers the knowledge and skills for implementation. Much of the literature has indicated that teachers feel unprepared to serve students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Schumm, Vaughn, Gordon, & Rothlein, 1994; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Clearly, our findings support the importance of initial and ongoing staff development as teachers learn to implement inclusive practices.

Second, collaborative activities among general and special educators were essential in developing a working environment that fostered inclusive practices. Through collaborative planning and teaching, general and special educators actively participated in the change process and learned about, appreciated, and benefited from the resources that these two groups had to offer. What emerged from these shared activities is what Rice (1996) characterized as a collaborative culture in which members are unified and interdependent upon one another. Given the joint efforts among general and special educators, participating schools developed a collaborative culture in which the special needs of students were the “business” of all teachers.

Finally, project activities reflected a commitment to change shared by administrators and teachers. Administrative support from both state and district leadership personnel provided funds for planning time, staff development, visits of exemplary sites, and implementation. Teachers, some of whom were not satisfied with existing practices, were integral to each phase of the project. As suggested by Darling-Hammond (1993), “It was the process of collective struggle that produced the vitality, the shared vision, and the conviction that allowed these schools to redesign education in fundamentally different ways . . . the opportunity to engage in the kind of empowering and enlivening dialogue that motivates change” (p. 761). It is important that this shared dialogue originated from individuals in positions of authority, top-down, and those responsible for daily implementation, bottom-up.

**Changes in Service Delivery**

Despite consistency in implementing the change model, there was significant variation in the development of inclusive practices among the involved schools. Some schools restructured services, serving students with disabilities in general education only, others modified services to include services in both general and special education classrooms, and still others expanded services to include students with severe disabilities or students in general education.

These findings suggest that although change models contribute to moving schools toward inclusive practices, it is the internal forces at the school—teachers, parents, and administrators—who negotiate the change process (Larrivee et al., 1997). For example, at some schools, an administrator and several teachers with expertise in inclusive education led the change process. At others, teachers interested in change worked collaboratively to develop inclusive practices. Finally, parents also provided a strong force for change (Grove & Fisher, 1999). At one site, one mother’s perseverance in seeking inclusive education at her child’s neighborhood school provided the impetus for expanding services to students with moderate-to-severe disabilities.
Moreover, because the project encouraged site decision-making and collaboration, it is not surprising that change in services differed among schools. In fact, the consistency in satisfaction, despite differences in inclusive practices, may reflect the commitment and ownership of school personnel in the change process. Inclusion is referred to as a delivery system, but there are no perfect models (McLeskey & Pugach, 1995; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002) because it actually takes many forms (National Information Center, 1995). For example, in a case study of six schools, Larrivee et al. (1997) found significant variations, including “pull-out, pull-in, consultation, collaboration, and combined programs” (p. 43). As schools move toward inclusive practices, alternate paths may therefore actually be healthy, reflecting the complexity of school environments and the unique characteristics of individual school sites.

**Sustaining and Continuing Inclusive Efforts**

Although participants expressed concerns about their ability to sustain reform efforts, two outcomes of the project support long-term change. First, leadership initially provided by the statewide project was assumed by district personnel. With a strong understanding of inclusive practices, these “local facilitators” (Loucks-Horsley & Roody, 1990) were committed to sustaining the changes made in service delivery and accepted responsibility for continued implementation. Second, teachers consistently reported the benefits of inclusion for students and faculty in both general and special education. If student and teacher outcomes remain favorably influenced by inclusive practices, the attitudes of the persons who are implementing classroom changes are likely to remain positive. With the continued satisfaction and commitment of teachers, reported changes in inclusive practices are sustainable.

However, if the resources necessary for successful inclusion are not forthcoming, student outcomes and teachers’ beliefs and practices may change. Not surprisingly, resources are a critical requisite of successful implementation, influencing teachers’ attitudes toward inclusive practices (Cook, Semmel, & Gerber, 1999; Larrivee et al., 1997). Findings from this study suggest that sufficient resources must be provided for ongoing staff development, collaborative planning, and classroom supports. Without the continued commitment of resources to these activities, the changes initiated in the project will be less likely to endure.

In addition to resources, the emerging challenges associated with changing organizational structures also threaten sustainability. Specifically, the roles and responsibilities of special educators shifted to include more extensive collaboration and consultation, and the lines between general and special education blurred. With these changes, teachers began to question their ability to maintain inclusive practices, given larger caseloads for special educators and increased numbers of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Moreover, staff members at the project schools expressed the need to develop additional inclusive sites. These findings are consistent with other studies that have indicated that care must be taken not to overload teachers, lest they begin to feel ineffective and question the benefits of inclusive practices (Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2000; Russ, Chiang, Rylance, & Bongers, 2001). Failure to address organizational issues, such as class size and the distribution of students with special needs at the school and district level, may undermine change over the long term. The decision to move toward inclusive practices demands a commitment not only to inclusive education but also to an ongoing process of evaluation and change. As suggested by McLeskey and Pugach (1995), “If we are to achieve successful examples of inclusion, we need to recognize that deep structural and curricular change is incremental—we need to be tolerant of that process” (p. 234).

**Practical Implications**

Although we believe our findings have implications for others, we are aware of the limitations of this descriptive study. First, data describing changes in service delivery were self-reports, without corroborating evidence, such as direct observation of inclusive practices. Second, and similarly, benefits were those reported by participants in response to questions regarding satisfaction with changes made in service delivery. Nevertheless, although additional measures are needed to validate reported outcomes, the interview data have increased our understanding of the process of moving toward inclusive practices.

Overall, the findings from this study are consistent with other research, suggesting caution in implementing inclusion until the requisite attitudes, accommodations, and adaptations for students with disabilities are in place (e.g., Kavale & Forness, 2000). To facilitate effective inclusive practices, support must be provided that promotes what Fullan (2001) called *re-culturing*, that is, “transforming the culture—changing the way we do things” (p. 44). This project not only reflects the complexity of the reform process but also contributes to an understanding of the diversity of programs that emerge from a common model of change. Specifically, schools’ responses included a range of inclusive practices—restructured, modified, and expanded services—that sought both to sustain specialized instruction for students with disabilities (Moody, Vaughn, Hughes, & Fischer, 2000) and to increase support for students who were struggling in general education.

Restructured services eliminated special education classes. Special education teachers shared caseloads according to grade level, with services provided through collaborative teaming and team teaching in general education. Where services were modified, separate special education classes continued, with an increase in supports in general education classrooms and pull-out and pull-aside services provided to students without disabilities. Expanded services brought students with severe disabilities back to their neighborhood...
schools and increased support to general education students through programs such as homework clubs, study skills sessions, and tutorial periods. The project provided examples of a variety of inclusive practices but left unresolved difficult questions regarding the distribution of students with disabilities both within and across schools.

We agree with Salend and Duhaney (1999) that the movement toward inclusive practices has the potential to have a “positive impact on students with and without disabilities and their teachers” (p. 124). These positive outcomes depend, however, on changing the perceptions of educators and engendering commitment and the provision of resources to serving the needs of both general and special education students. Finally, although successful in changing the delivery of services, inclusive models must continue to address the individualized needs of students, providing specialized intensive instruction for students with disabilities and other students with special needs. Clearly, there are many paths toward inclusive practices and challenges along the way. It is only through the combined efforts of general and special educators in collaboration with parents that schools move toward inclusive practices and ultimately strengthen teaching and learning for all students.

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REFERENCES


(Appendix on next page)
APPENDIX

Teacher Interview
- Describe how students with disabilities are served in your school/classroom.
- Have services changed from previous years? How?
- How do you feel about these changes?
- What do you feel has been the impetus for change?
- How have these changes affected other students?
- How have parents of students in general and special education responded to these changes?
- What do you see as barriers to change?
- If an educator from another district were to visit your school, what one or two aspects of your program would you highlight as the most successful practices?

Administrator Interview
- Describe the changes in your school in serving students with disabilities.
- How have you contributed to these changes?
- How do you feel about the changes?
- What do you feel has been the impetus for change?
- How have parents of students in general and special education responded to these changes?
- What do you see as barriers to change?
- If a principal from another school district were to visit your school, what one or two aspects of your program would you highlight as the most successful practices? What process would you suggest to facilitate change?

Parent Interview
- Describe your child’s program.
- Has the program changed from previous years? How?
- How do you feel about these changes?
- How do you feel this program could be improved?
- If you were describing your child’s program to another parent, what would you highlight as the most helpful/successful practices?

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