INTRODUCTION

Unfortunately what makes my school unique is the lack of an inclusion setting for most of the special needs students in my building. Scheduling has always been the sticking point on this issue. When I first came to the school system, I was told that I could take something to my principal and we would work on it together. Well, I did just that, and we really could not work out a fair system for these students. At a time when staffing has been severely cut, we simply need more adults to help those students in the general education environment. The research problem is related to this issue. An effective way to incorporate inclusion at this middle school has not been found.

There are three basic research questions formed from this problem. Is there evidence that inclusion is the best way to serve special needs students? Would all special needs students be included, no matter the severity of their disability? Is there a way to include students and still provide the support necessary for their success in the general education environment?

The target audiences for this research are the teachers and administrator at my building. The objectives are: 1) To define inclusion based on current published research, 2) To cite successful inclusion models in other school settings, and 3) To propose a workable solution for my school and present it to the current administrator and teachers. The relevance of this research topic is that since every other level in the district uses inclusive practices for their special
needs students, this building should also be including those students in the regular education environment at the seventh and eighth grade levels.

Out of the research a power point presentation will be created that I can present not only to those in my building but also to the entire school district in the fall. I feel that this presentation will help others to understand what a successful inclusion program should look like and how it can be implemented. I would insure that there are practical solutions given for classroom management, assessments, and fairness issues. I believe that I would have to bring the area of differentiation into this presentation as I am talking about inclusive practices. The desired outcome is that this will make a significant difference in the way in which inclusion is viewed by the administrator and teachers with which I presently work.

Review of the Literature

*Inclusion Defined*

Just what is this thing called Inclusion? There is much research into the term itself and the way in which it is being implemented in the nation’s schools. The initial push to include students with disabilities in classes with their non-disabled peers evolved out of an effort by parents of disabled students. These parents felt that their children were being educationally shortchanged (Soodak, 2003). A major catalyst, which has increased the awareness of inclusion, is the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1975 (IDEA). According to this act, a student with a disability is to be educated in the least restrictive
environment to the maximum extent appropriate for that child. The disabled student cannot be denied placement in the regular education classroom unless it can be proven that the student would not benefit academically from that placement (Conrad, 1997). In his research, Lindsay (2003) mentions two other disqualifications. He states that if the student presents a danger to classmates then he/she may be excluded. Also mentioned was the situation in which having the student in the classroom takes up a disproportionate amount of the teacher’s time as being another reason for exclusion.

The 1997 reauthorization of IDEA broadened inclusion by including physical and social access, as well as academic access, to the general education environment (Villa, 2003). Ideally inclusive education would mean that every student would have value as a contributing member of his/her school. The focus becomes the learning needs of the individual student rather than wholesale learning objectives for a group (King, 2003). In its purest form inclusion can be said to mean teaching all children in the context of the general classroom setting to the benefit of disabled and non-disabled students alike (Ritter, 1999).

Many researchers argue that inclusion is not just about education but rather about creating the democratic society we so highly prize, where all people are valued for their differences. The hope is that one day there will be no need to say “inclusive education” because the focus will be on best practices that promote effective educational opportunities for all students (Sapon-Shevin, 2003).
Another important facet of inclusion is that every special needs student will receive appropriate services and supports within the general education classroom. Every pupil should receive an education that meets his/her specific needs and no student should be denied entrance into a general education class based upon the severity of a disability. Indeed, inclusion is not just dumping students with disabilities into the regular education classroom with no support or services. Inclusion should never jeopardize the level of academic challenge for the general education students by lowering the standards or slowing down the pace of instruction (McLeskey, 2000).

Dealing with diversity in a way that eliminates demeaning labels is a worthy goal for the inclusive school. However, support systems are necessary to facilitate learning for disabled students, if they are to succeed in the general education setting (Norwich, 2002).

Research has shown that for inclusion to work in any given setting there must be active participation by individuals in that setting. This could mean a continuum of activity from listening to someone else read, helping in a group activity, researching information, writing a story, reading to someone, building a model, or using manipulatives to solve problems. Hands-on activities engage the students in learning. With greater involvement, there is greater potential for learning (Stockall, 2002).

For the purposes of this research the definition of inclusion is changing general education practices to make sure that what we are teaching our students
fits their needs rather than expecting the students to fit into what is being taught.

Meeting individual student needs will necessitate significant changes in the way we educate students. Those changes will be incorporated in all phases of the educational process (McLeskey, 2000). As inclusion is examined it should become very apparent that educational practices will need to improve for all students, not just those with disabilities.

*Hallmarks of Effective Inclusion*

There are important components in successful inclusion programs. The body of research has identified these hallmarks as vital to the effective establishment of an inclusive school: visionary leadership, adequate resources, best practices, collaboration among all stakeholders, professional training and development, differentiation in the classroom, and additional adult support where indicated.

From the outset visionary leadership is a must. While principals cannot successfully force inclusion upon teachers, they can create an environment where redefined roles and relationships among adults are encouraged. This would be necessary to support the diverse population of students (Villa, 2003). Principals must actively recruit teachers, parents, and students in creating an inclusive school. Being willing to listen to concerns and providing release time for teacher training are just two ways in which administrators can support their teachers as they begin this new venture. Another critical provision for inclusive practices would be that of allotting time for teachers to collaborate and plan instruction.
together. This calls for some creativity in scheduling and a concern for staff development (Hornby, 1999).

Lack of financial resources should not be misconstrued as an excuse to abandon the move toward inclusive practices. However, when school staffs need training and release time, then finances do come into play. If a school district is committed to the kind of change that inclusion brings, then money must be found to facilitate that change (Burstein, 2004). Districts must be able to obtain the same amount of money no matter where the student is serviced, in the inclusive classroom or resource room (Roach, 2002). The need for support in the inclusive setting increases the need for funds instead of decreasing the need. Grants can be written; but long term financing is necessary if inclusion is to be enduring.

Resources are not just financial in nature. Our schools’ best resources are teachers who bring experience and enthusiasm to their classrooms everyday. Many teachers prefer learning inclusive practices from successful colleagues. Effective teachers are eager to share ideas and activities that work for them.

Best practices for facilitating inclusion are the same best practices that teachers employ to successfully instruct all students. Trans-disciplinary teaming is an approach in which teachers from different subject areas combine their instruction on a particular topic. This is an effective way to create the “big picture” for students. Block scheduling allows more time with fewer students for teachers at the secondary level. This facilitates closer relationships between teacher and students. School wide positive behavior support and disciplinary
approaches are proven research-based practices that support tolerance instead of expulsion (Villa, 2003). At the classroom level there are a number of best practices that support inclusion. Cooperative learning and partner learning give greater responsibility for learning to the students. Project and activity based learning use authentic assessments to quantify student learning. A balanced approach to literacy includes instruction in both phonics and whole language. Thematic units tie several disciplines together and help students see the interconnectedness of various subjects. In the age of the Internet, use of technology is vital for academic research and future acquisition to the job market (Villa, 2003).

Collaboration between all stakeholders is essential if inclusion is to succeed. Coordination and planning between special and general educators is essential. This can take many forms including co-teaching, parallel teaching, consultation, and supportive teaching. In co-teaching both special educators and general educators teach in tandem in the general education classroom. Different instruction may be presented by the special needs teacher and the general education teacher with different groups around the classroom in the parallel teaching approach. In consultation situations the special needs teacher would provide information to the general educator so that the general educator could teach all the students in the inclusive classroom. Supportive teaching is that situation in which the general educator leads the class with the special educator circulating around the room to help individuals as the need arises (Hammond,
If any of these approaches are to be effective then teachers need the time to be able to consult one another and plan together (Hornby, 1999). If inclusion is to thrive educators must stop thinking of their roles in isolation. No longer would special needs students by “mine” or general education students be “hers” because they would all be “ours.” Since both general education and special education teachers have their own expertise, inclusive education draws on both to the benefit of all students (Villa, 2003).

Special needs teachers’ roles will change in an inclusive setting. It is important for that change to be a positive one. Too many times special needs teachers have become an aide in the general educational environment. Professionals in these situations feel undervalued and unappreciated. Collaboration means that each teacher has valuable input into what is being taught, as well as who does the teaching, and how they do the teaching (Klingner, 2002).

This is not time to develop an “us” versus “them” attitude. Many general education teachers have been accused of being educated to teach content not students. Insults are not conducive to collaboration. All such remarks must be kept to a minimum if we are to work in cooperation to educate each student well. While it may be true that special education teachers have been taught more about process, the general education teachers are probably more expert in content knowledge in their individual fields than are special needs teachers. Thus both parties can bring important advantages to the collaboration (Hardin, 1996).
Collaborative learning by students is just as important. In these classrooms students have time to act as coaches to each other and the teacher has time to conference with individual students. Students also feel more empowered to direct their own learning (King, 2003). Peer assisted learning has some significant advantages. It can be used in any content area. It can help students develop effective communication/personal/social skills. Students can benefit from being the tutor or the tutee. In schools where finances are limited, it does not put an added strain on the budget (Topping, 2003).

MacKenzie (2003) states in her research that teachers value professional development that is practical and can be used in their classrooms right away. Training for inclusion could be accomplished in a number of ways. Conferences, workshops, summer courses offered either on-site or at a nearby university, and visits to successful inclusive schools are all appropriate venues (Roach, 2002).

Another approach, which has proven quite valuable, is calling upon inclusion facilitators to come into the school and work with the entire staff to develop a plan and dispel qualms that educators might have concerning their ability to deal with special needs students (Weiner, 2003).

One critical misconception that many educators have about fairness stands in the way of developing an inclusive school. That misconception is that all students must be treated the same for everything to be “fair.” Those same educators would not consider taking away someone’s glasses just because everyone in the class did not have glasses. But they think that accommodating
different learning styles is cheating in some way because everyone is not getting the same accommodations. Inclusion cannot and will not work as long as these beliefs are prevalent.

Educators must start to think differently about how education should be delivered to students. “Fair” must be redefined as providing every student with what he/she needs rather than providing the same thing for every student. Fairness should mean providing different instructional techniques, course content, academic expectations, and types of assessments for each student dependent upon what that student needs to progress successfully (McLeskey, 2000). Services must be available to support students and teachers in order to ensure that the needs of an ever-widening range of learners are met.

Research shows that although some educators feel that there is incompatibility between standards-based instruction and differentiation, they actually fit together quite well. Standards-based curriculum tells us what to teach and differentiation tells us how to go about it. If we select a given standard, a teacher can use tiered assignments, different objectives, heterogeneous groupings, and varied expectations to challenge all the students in her class (Tomlinson, 2000). Differentiation does not end there. Assessment must be authentic and can take many forms. Portfolios, role-playing, demonstrations, PowerPoint presentations, and songs are valid alternatives to paper and pencil tests.

The support of students with disabilities in the general education environment often calls for help from other adults. Usually these other adults are
hired as teacher aides or instructional assistants. Sometimes they work with many children and sometimes they work with only one or two. While the relationship between a teaching assistant and teacher is important, training for these assistants is vital to the successful performance of their job in assisting students with special learning needs. The teaching assistant must work hard to insure that students do not become dependent upon him/her to give “answers” rather than help the students to find the answers for themselves (MacKenzie, 2003).

Where Do We Start?

When identifying components of inclusion this researcher noted that visionary leadership must come first. If our schools are to become more inclusive then the administrators must believe that inclusion will meet the needs of students under their spheres of influence (Lindsay, 2003). Universities increasingly offer degrees in educational administration, which empower administrators to direct all educational programs for every student in their building or district. Fewer universities are offering degrees in special education supervision. Thus many principals, superintendents, and curriculum supervisors do not have the expertise needed to direct inclusive reforms. When approaching this aspect of educational reform, they know what the law demands. They must move beyond what the letter of the law says and realize what the spirit of the law is hoping to accomplish in the lives of diverse student populations (Crockett, 2002). The administrator in the building must make sure that all faculty members and support staff own and
support this change or efforts to enact that change will be stymied. It becomes
the job of the administrator to facilitate his/her staff in learning and implementing
inclusive practices (McLeskey, 2002).

The second step in developing an inclusive school is the active
engagement of all stakeholders. In any arena of school change those who will be
affected by that change must be actively involved in formulating the change for
that change to be effective. Implementing inclusion involves support at both the
system level and in each and every classroom (Villa, 2003). Teachers’ attitudes
and instructional style has a tremendous effect upon the performance and
academic progress of those students they teach (Mungai, 2002). No amount of
administrative pressure on teachers to “do inclusion” will be successful if those
teachers are not involved in preparing the changes that will need to be made.

Teachers need assurance that they will be constructing the framework for
change in their school building. The entire staff in a building should be involved
in the process, not just special needs teachers (McLeskey, 2002).

These changes will look different in elementary, middle, and high school
settings because the changes should be tailored to fit each individual school
setting. Therefore, professional development will be different for the different
levels.

There will be resistance to change and this should be expected. The only
reason educators might not resist change is that the proposed changes are rather
superficial and they will not require significant effort to change the daily
instructional processes already in place (McLeskey, 2000). Teachers should be
given ample opportunities to visit inclusive schools and not only observe
inclusion at work but also be given opportunities to talk with the teachers,
principal, and support staff. This will allow stakeholders to see what inclusion
looks like and how it can succeed. Challenges can also be discussed so that
participants won’t be blind-sided when problems occur as they strive to
implement inclusive practices (McLeskey, 2002).

Teachers must start to think in a different way. Instead of how smart are
my students? the question becomes how are my students smart? Instead of how
will this student fit into my curriculum? the question becomes how can I adapt the
curriculum to work for my student? The approach is not how will the special
needs student adapt to the general education classroom? But how can the general
education experience be changed so that all students can succeed? This is a major
change in thinking, a paradigm shift: Student-centered learning instead of content-
centered learning (King, 2003).

The attitude of the teacher is the number one factor for determining social
climate in the classroom. This social climate has been shown to have serious
consequences for student learning. The goal should be for all members of a class
to be valued for what they individually bring to that group (Sapon-Shevin, 2003).
Students with disabilities need to feel a part of their general education
environment on a social level. It is crucial that teachers see the need to provide a
classroom climate in which good behavior is rewarded. If students are not in a
place where they can learn, they let teachers know with inappropriate behaviors (McLeskey, 2000).

Many research projects have examined this area. Some common traits have been found in classrooms that promote and encourage all learners. One characteristic is that of establishing trust and fairness in the classroom. Teachers must address student perceptions about those with disabilities. In inclusive classrooms all learners help establish rules and are involved in classroom management decisions. Students feel an ownership when they have been instrumental in developing the structure of the classroom rules. Teachers can prevent discipline problems if they anticipate those problems and intervene early enough to head them off (McLeskey, 2000).

Peer mediation is also a very effective way to deal with confrontational situations that arise in the school setting. Training mediators in handling conflict resolution is a proven way to instill responsible citizenship in our students. Cooperative learning and peer tutoring engage all students in the daily life of the school (Farlow, 1996). A safe school environment encourages formation of friendships, which can last a lifetime. Positive interactions and an accepting environment are germane to inclusion, where all students can feel they are vital participants.

For a disabled student to be physically in the classroom with non-disabled peers is important; but it is certainly not the heart of inclusion. An included special needs student needs to feel valued as an active participant. The obvious
question, which arises from this situation, is how can teachers include students with more severe disabilities in the general education environment? A number of studies have been completed concerning this very issue. The focus for students with more severe disabilities should be skill acquisition, specifically behavioral, communication, motor, social, and academic skills. Teachers do need to plan lessons that will promote these skills as well as engender a climate in the classroom of acceptance of the disabled student (Downing, 2003). Teachers can find learning opportunities in many every day activities within the room such as handing out homework papers, collecting materials for a lab, helping to group fellow students for a learning activity, and creating a collage of pictures on the subject of the lesson.

One study by McDonnell (2003) found that students with developmental disabilities in inclusive settings showed improvement in the area of adaptive behavior. Further study revealed that these students had successfully completed most of their IEP objectives for the year. Another important finding was that students in the inclusive setting who were not disabled had achieved at similar levels as those who were in comparison classrooms where there was no inclusion, thus allaying any fear that non-disabled students in inclusive settings might be negatively affected.

Given the increasingly diverse abilities of today’s students, teachers need strategies to help them make appropriate modifications and adaptations in instructional styles, curriculum, and learning environments. The first thing a
teacher must do when making instructional decisions is to show care for the special needs student. Deciding to emphasize that student’s strengths while working on his/her weaknesses is a major step in the right direction (Tomlinson, 2003).

The teacher should reinforce the student’s ability to solve their own problems so they do not become dependent on others to solve problems for them. Teachers need to examine their classroom’s physical and emotional environment and ask some important questions. What does how I teach demand from my students? Are there distractions in the room that take away from learning? What does the arrangement of the desks in my room demand of my students? The teacher should then list classroom characteristics that encourage student achievement and decide ways that the current situation could be modified to support that encouragement. The teacher should then implement accommodations and teach goals. Using flexible grouping (whole group, small group, and individual conference settings) would enrich student interactions. The educator should collaborate with other teachers who have had success, change instruction as necessary, and evaluate results. If the students are making progress, stay the course. If the students are not making progress, adapt instruction appropriately and evaluate again. The most important thing to consider is finding ways for all of the students to succeed (Prater, 2003).

Adaptations are limited only by the creativity of the teacher implementing them, but a few will be discussed here. Adaptations can be made in the size of the
assignment, for example, the number of math problems each student must complete. Increasing the time a student may take to complete an assignment is another way to adapt. Increasing support with an instructional assistant or study buddies can also help a special needs student succeed. Allowing a student to verbally respond to a test instead of writing the answers is an adaptation that an instructional assistant could perform. Providing textbook chapters on tape helps below grade level readers complete content area assignments (McLeskey, 2000). Using hands-on learning, especially for more difficult abstract concepts, helps all learners grasp meaning. The inquiry process discussed in research by Maroney, Finson, Beaver, and Jensen (2003) works quite well for all students in the area of science. Allowing students to experiment with possible solutions to various questions in the physical world around them, teachers encourage different solution routes and possibly totally different solutions to scientific problems. Before students ever do the lab, teachers should do the lab noting the time it takes, materials needed to do the activity, outcomes to expect, and questions that might arise during the process. Assessing students should be an ongoing daily activity.

In research conducted by Polloway, Epstein, and Bursuck (2003) it was found that certain adaptations in testing are more acceptable than others. Adaptations were divided into accommodations and modifications. Accommodations referred to processing changes made to accommodate for specific disabilities. These might include back and white copies of a test, large print textbooks, response format for testing, place of testing, more time to take a
test, providing extra space to answer questions, or having the test read aloud by a teacher or instructional assistant. Modifications included changes in content expected of certain students, limiting the amount of material a student would be tested on, allowing students to use notes on tests, and giving take-home tests. Accommodations were viewed much more favorably than modifications. When discussing testing, the subject of grades inevitably arises. Research on assessment in inclusive settings cautions that grading should reflect the growth of the learner, not whether the learner is a good test taker (Tomlinson, 2003).

This research has discussed ways to implement an inclusive school from the standpoint of administrators, teachers, and students. Parents are another group that are at times underrepresented. Parents have a huge stake in the education of their children. To exclude them is not possible due to IDEA, which states that parents must be co-producers of the Individualized Educational Plan for their special needs student. Many times educators misinterpret parental involvement.

One area in which educators have enlisted parents is that of homework completion. Studies show that when teachers reinforce homework completion with rewards, graphing homework completion (to be shared with parents), designing homework that related to daily lives, or using homework planners, homework completion rates improved. Graphing and self-monitoring are excellent ways to build responsibility in all students.

Even though these strategies helped students complete their homework, it was found that no amount of reward was effective if the homework was beyond
the students’ academic level. Parents report that they have trouble getting
students to complete homework due to busy schedules and not understanding
concepts (math mostly) (Bryan, 2004). One study by Bauer and Ulrich (2002)
used Palm Pilots to improve the organizational skills of sixth graders. The
students were very comfortable with the technology and were very excited about
going their own personal Palm IIIxe. There was immediate success as students
were keeping better track of assignments and sending class information to
classmates. There was little doubt that using this technology really helped
students with learning disabilities to stay up-to-date with homework. A word of
cautions was sounded concerning monitoring the use of handhelds by students. It is
a useful tool but not entirely problem free.

Many parents are tentative when first approached on the subject of
inclusion. While they certainly do not want their children segregated or
condemned to the “special education wing,” they also worry about how their child
will do in the more demanding environment of the general education classroom.
Parents are an excellent source of information about how their children view the
experience of being included. Interviews with parents about their perceptions of
inclusion can be very helpful and can open a dialog about the inclusive setting
(Salend, 2002). Communication is very important in establishing trust between
the parent and the student’s teachers. To let a problem fester with little
communication between teachers and parent can be fatal to that trust. It is
imperative that educators relay information to parents about the inclusive
practices with which their child is being taught in a positive manner. Phone calls home should be about good things that are happening in school, not just problems.

Developing an inclusive school at the secondary level provides challenges not seen at the elementary level. In the secondary school, curricular content is covered in depth. If students do not have good basic skills in place, for instance reading skills, it becomes increasingly difficult for those students to achieve success. Secondary schools also must work with students in developing career goals, living skills, and transition to the real world after high school. Most teachers at the secondary level believe that by the time students enter this learning arena they have mastered basic skills so those skills can be used to delve into the content areas being taught at the secondary level (McLeskey, 2000).

When these skills have not been learned in elementary school, the pressure increases to find creative ways to help students absorb the secondary curriculum. Block scheduling has been effective in reducing the number of students for which one teacher is responsible in any one given term. Thus the teacher can become better acquainted with the students he/she teaches. Also the block of eighty minutes allows for more differentiated instruction. Small group breakout sessions, in which students work with each other to make sense of the content knowledge, are basic to inclusive practices. Most secondary teachers have been taught to teach their particular area of knowledge to large groups of students. They have developed expertise in their area. It is very hard to change this organizational
structure in present day school culture. Block scheduling is a step in the right
direction. Secondary teachers do not have as much autonomy about what they
may choose to teach as elementary teachers. Graduation tests (OGT) and
SAT/ACT tests for college admission put additional pressure on the secondary
educator (McLeskey, 2000).

In several successful inclusive secondary school programs tutoring has
been made available to all students. Students who need help check into the
tutoring room and paraprofessionals are available at all times of the day to help
students look up information, study for upcoming tests, or just to help with
homework assignments. The resource center in one high school has become an
area of support for both students and teachers. Teachers have been encouraged to
visit the center for improving classroom delivery, different assessment strategies,
and many other professional development activities. When not involved in
instruction, teachers have volunteered planning time to work in the center. Special
education students have benefited in ways that were not planned. Being with non-
disabled peers in the center at various times, they have come to realize that their
classmates also need help. This has increased student confidence and academic
interaction. Students don’t feel singled out and differences in learning styles and
capacities are valued. All students work collaboratively so they can learn and
grow together (Hardin, 1996).
Summary

Research has shown many obvious benefits of the inclusive school environment for all learners. School should be a place where differences are celebrated and every participant feels connected in positive ways. Friendships are nurtured and working together to achieve a goal is the ideal. Improved self-concept and the development of personal principles are paramount. Acquisition of knowledge is multi-dimensional and accommodations for learning styles and capacities are commonplace. Changing general education practices to make sure that what we are teaching our students fits their needs rather than expecting the students to fit into what is being taught is the definition of inclusion.

The benchmarks for inclusion are: leadership that is supportive and visionary, adequate resources that support inclusive practices, best practices in the classroom that support all learners, collaboration among all stakeholders, professional development and training for all staff members, differentiated instruction and assessment, and additional adult support where indicated. When implementing inclusive practices in a given school, great changes will take place. Inclusion is a paradigm shift in thinking about the business of educating an ever-widening diversity of learners. It is not an add-on.

Change must be supported by the administration if it is to succeed. Each school must be empowered to determine how that change will look in their particular setting. Teachers must be actively involved in formulating the change if the change is to be enduring. Professional development will be absolutely
necessary to teach educators new skills required in inclusive settings. When administrators, teachers and other staff members, students, and parents work together, we can create a positive atmosphere where students can learn. This is clearly not just a special education issue. We must guarantee that all students feel valued as important contributors in the lives of their individual schools. Through active participation comes the knowledge that each individual in our schools and in our society does make a difference.
REFERENCES


**Biographical Sketch**

Roberta Lynn Harris is an intervention specialist in a rural Ohio school system. She has been teaching seventh and eighth grade students with special needs for seven years. She brings eight years of prior experience, in the area of general education, to the present position. Lynn received her undergraduate degree from Ohio University. She is married to a football coach and high school American History teacher. Her son also coaches football and teaches Social
Studies. Lynn will receive her Master in Education: Intervention Specialist degree in December 2004. Lynn dedicates the body of this work to the memory of her daughter.