Increasing Inclusive Practices in an Elementary School Using Transcendental Phenomenology

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ABSTRACT

This transcendental phenomenology study examined two schools, one comprehensive elementary school and one segregated special education center, as they transitioned to become one school to create more inclusive spaces for students with extensive support needs (i.e., intellectual and developmental disabilities). The transition occurred over a three-year period. The study used purposive sampling. Three general education and three special education teachers and the principal completed individual interviews during Year 3 of the transition. Classroom observations were conducted. The study used thematic analysis and revealed themes that described the school restructuring process: uncertainty during restructuring process; uncertainty around access based on students' abilities and activities; and perceptions of additive and subtractive lens during the restructuring process. Implications include providing sufficient support in teacher education programs, professional development and support for teachers, administrators, parents and students.

*E*ven as the inclusive education movement has gained momentum, barriers to inclusion, including attitudinal ones, remain for students with extensive support needs (Gee et al., 2020; Pivik et al., 2002). Students with extensive support needs (ESN) include students with significant disabilities that may have a disability label of intellectual disability or autism and require ongoing support to access the general education curriculum (Taub et al., 2017). Students with ESN are more likely to be educated in segregated settings (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). There is a gap in the recent literature on how inclusive spaces are created from segregated settings that are important

to future research and educational practice. This transcendental phenomenology study sets out to use lived experiences to understand how two schools (one comprehensive elementary school and one segregated special education center) transformed their practices to create one school to offer more inclusive practices for students with ESN.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 is the federal law that guides special education services and placement in the United States. Sec. 612(a)(5) of IDEA states that students should be educated with their peers without disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Schools must provide students with disabilities access to general education classrooms to the maximum extent possible (IDEA, 2004). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2024), 67% of students with disabilities overall are educated in general education classrooms 80% or more of the time. In contrast, students identified as having more significant disabilities and ESN, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, continue to be educated in segregated settings, spending only 21% of the time in general education settings.

Efforts at inclusion vary for students with mild to moderate support needs (MMSN) compared to students with ESN as demonstrated by the percentage. Inclusive classroom teachers report that instruction for students with ESN is focused on social development while instruction for students with MMSN is focused on academic performance (Cameron & Cook, 2013). Attitudinal changes need to occur in order for students with ESN to be included and successful in the general education classrooms. In order for the inclusion of students with ESN to be successful, efforts must move beyond just providing basic access or educating students in the same spaces, they must also bolster systemic beliefs in inclusion and, ultimately, integrating general and special education into one system (Taylor & Sailor, 2024).

Benefits of the General Education Classroom

While students with ESN have historically not been included in general education classrooms, research consistently shows that all students, with and without disabilities, benefit from inclusive education (Feldman et al., 2015; Gee et al., 2020; Kurth et al., 2014; Shogren et al., 2015). Students with ESN are better prepared for adulthood and responsibilities when educated in inclusive settings (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Morningstar et al., 2015). There is also evidence to suggest that teacher expectations increase for students with ESN as they gain access to general education classes (Agran et al., 2010; Spooner et al., 2006). Peer supports available in inclusive settings have been shown to be as effective and sometimes even more effective than adult supports for teaching students with disabilities (Carter et al., 2007; Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2009; Olson et al., 2016). In addition, when students with ESN participate in general education, their presence does not have a negative impact on the progress and achievement of students without disabilities (Dessemontet & Bless, 2013; Kurth et al., 2014). Kart and Kart (2021) found positive or neutral impacts on academic achievement and positive social impacts for students without disabilities in inclusive classrooms.

Comprehensive school reform is necessary for teachers and administrators to create sustainable inclusive practices (McLeskey & Waldron, 2010). Since the enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 and its amendments of IDEA (1990, 1997, 2004), advocates, educators, and researchers in the United States have increasingly called for reform to facilitate the inclusion of students with ESN alongside their peers without disabilities in public school settings (Brock & Schaefer, 2015; Gee et al., 2020). A key finding is that general

and special education teachers' and members of school leadership teams' attitudes toward including students with ESN are a strong predictor of successful inclusion efforts (Olson et al., 1997). Teacher's attitudes toward inclusion also impact their self-efficacy in implementing inclusive practices (Avramidis et al., 2019).

Though the benefits of inclusion are well established, understanding how segregated campuses move toward more inclusive practices has not been well documented. This research study is designed to gain an understanding of how restructuring a comprehensive elementary school increases inclusive practices for students with ESN. Specifically, our aim is to capture the perceptions of stakeholders during this process. Using a phenomenological approach, we focused on how the general and special education teachers and the school principal experienced the restructuring process to facilitate increased inclusive practices. The two research questions were:

Research Question 1: What are teachers' and school principal's experience in the restructuring process for two schools (segregated special education center and elementary school) to become one comprehensive school?

Research Question 2: What are the teachers' and school principal's perceptions of the increased inclusive education for students with ESN?

Method

Selection of School Site

This study uses a transcendental phenomenology approach to understand the essence of the experience of teachers and a principal moving toward more inclusive practices for students with ESN from segregated settings (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Phenomenological qualitative research methodology allows researchers to describe experiences shared by a group of individuals, in this case teachers and the principal, who experienced the phenomenon of a school's transformation (i.e., building one school from two separate schools; Creswell, 2007). This fulfills a need for qualitative, descriptive research that increases our understanding of how schools transform into creating more inclusive spaces.

Research Site

Lincoln Avenue Elementary School (a pseudonym) is located in a large urban school district. We were referred by district administrators to Lincoln Avenue Elementary School because it was undergoing a restructuring process intended to increase the inclusion of students with ESN. Although research has documented factors that contribute to the success of a highly effective, inclusive elementary school (McLeskey et al., 2014), Lincoln Avenue Elementary School represents a unique opportunity, as we were granted access to the school while it was in the final year of its three-year restructuring process. During Year 1, two adjacent schools, which shared the same city block, were completely separate. One was a segregated special education center that served students with ESN, and the other was a comprehensive general education elementary school, with students with and without disabilities. Through the restructuring process, the two schools became one school site and received training on inclusive practices. Both general and special education teachers began to provide instructional support to students with all ability levels. The majority of students at the newly restructured Lincoln Avenue Elementary School are

Hispanic (69%) and from low income households (56%). The demographics of the current merged schools are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographics of Student Population at Lincoln Avenue Elementary School*

Category	Percentage
Race/Ethnicity	
Hispanic	69%
White	14%
Black	13%
Asian	2%
Other	2%
Gender	
Female	47%
Male	53%
Family income level	
Low income	56%
Students with disabilities	12%

The campuses of the two school sites were divided by a physical barrier, a 6-foot cyclone fence that separated their playgrounds. Prior to the restructuring, students with MMSN (i.e., students who require less support compared to students with ESN) and one segregated self-contained class with students with ESN were educated at the comprehensive elementary campus, while the majority of the students with ESN were educated at the segregated special education center. The students and teachers from the separate schools rarely interacted with one another and, prior to the restructuring, did not share assemblies, faculty meetings, or professional development. The schools had separate parking lots, entrances, faculty lounges, administrative offices, and administrators.

As part of the restructuring process in Years 2 and 3, several important school features changed. The new combined school took on the name of the comprehensive elementary school, dropping the former name of the special education center. The principal of the comprehensive elementary school, Lincoln Avenue Elementary School, became the principal of the entire school campus. The principal of the segregated special education center became the assistant principal of the newly merged Lincoln Avenue Elementary School. The physical space of the school also changed. The 6 foot cyclone fence that had divided the two playgrounds was removed, and the school playground space increased for all students. By Year 3, several general education classes were relocated to what was the former segregated site, while several of the special education classes were also relocated to the former elementary school site.

Participants

We recruited teachers from both of the original campuses as well as the principal from Lincoln Avenue Elementary School ($n = 7$). Participants included six teachers (three general and three special education teachers) and the principal. The general education and special education teachers taught a variety of grade levels (Kindergarten through 5th grade) and provided direct instructional support for students with and without disabilities. A summary of the study participants' demographics is presented in Table 2. Demographics of the students with and without disabilities are not included as they were not identified as a participant of the study.

Table 2. *Demographics of the Participating Staff at Lincoln Avenue Elementary School*

Role	Grade Level	Special Education Program Designation
Principal		
General education teacher	1st	
General education teacher	K	
General education teacher	4th and 5th	
Special education teacher	K–5th	Multiple disabilities
Special education teacher	K–5th	Multiple disabilities
Special education teacher	3rd–5th	Intellectual disability

Procedure

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals from the university and school district to conduct the study, we contacted the principal of Lincoln Avenue Elementary School in November of Year 3 in the restructuring process to discuss the purpose and procedures of the study. After receiving the principal's approval to conduct the study, we began recruitment of teachers. The criteria for teachers to participate in the study included providing direct instructional support to both students with and without disabilities and one of the following criteria: (1) a special education teacher who worked with students with ESN who were included in some capacity with their peers without disabilities or (2) a general education teacher who worked with students without disabilities but who participated in and/or facilitated inclusive activities with students with ESN for part of the school day.

We attended a faculty meeting where general and special education teachers were present in February of Year 3 in the restructuring process and shared information about the study. Initially, 13 of the 30 teachers at Lincoln Avenue Elementary School expressed interest in participating in the study. The teachers were pre-screened to determine whether they were participating in inclusive activities. Inclusive activities were defined as spending instructional time with both students with and without disabilities. Six teachers met the inclusion criteria. We provided participants with a consent form that described the purpose of the study. All six teachers agreed to participate in individual interviews and to allow us to observe their classrooms at times during which inclusive activities were taking place. The principal also consented to participate in an individual interview.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with preset questions outlined (Seidman, 2006) and field notes from ethnographic observations (Emerson et al., 2011). Class observations and individual interviews with teachers were conducted in March, April, and May of Year 3. All interviews were audio recorded. One member of the research team interviewed the principal to understand the role of leadership in fostering the current school climate surrounding inclusion. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, until data saturation was reached.

A total of eight observations were conducted at Lincoln Avenue Elementary School between April and May, with two members of the research team present at all observations. Observations were determined based upon the voluntary participation of the teachers and the availability of inclusive activities. We observed six classroom activities and two non-academic activities (recess and lunch), with observations ranging from 20 to 60 minutes. We documented school routines using ethnographic observation techniques, such as field notes (Emerson et al., 2011). Following each observation, the two researchers debriefed immediately on what they observed and compared their field notes.

Analysis

We used a transcendental phenomenological approach for this study. The first step in the analysis is the epoche process (Moustakas, 1994). We held team meetings twice a month in which we reflected on our positionality in relation to the phenomenon (i.e., increasing inclusive practices for students with ESN) as former special education teachers and current teacher educators and how it might influence how the data are interpreted. Two researchers were assigned to each transcript, and each researcher independently coded a subset of transcripts. Field notes and interviews were initially open coded, and then axial codes were generated (Saldana, 2013). The researchers used observational procedures for *seeing* (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987) which includes descriptive observation, focused observation, and selective observation. The researchers noted what they saw, noted particular instances in the observations, and concentrated on specific parts of that observation that related back to the interviews and themes.

In team meetings, we discussed the observation sessions and interviews, taking note of similarities and differences to determine preliminary overarching codes. After reviewing and discussing all of the transcripts and codes, we identified ten superordinate codes. During subsequent meetings, we noted emerging patterns based on statements made during the interviews (Moustakas, 1994) and consolidated the ten codes into three interrelated themes. Triangulation of data occurred via comparison of interview transcripts and researcher field notes and the use of existing research.

Findings

Three interrelated themes emerged as participants described the restructuring process the school had undergone to increase inclusive practices. These were: (1) uncertainty during the restructuring process, (2) uncertainty around access based on students' abilities and activities, and (3) perceptions of additive and subtractive lens during the restructuring process. Theme 1 describes the participants' experiences in this phenomenon and answers the first research question about the restructuring process. Themes 2 and 3 address the second research question, specifically capturing participants' perceptions during this process.

Theme 1: Uncertainty During the Restructuring Process

Uncertainty manifested in different ways for participants over the 3 year period. This theme describes the participants' journey, including their changing attitudes as Lincoln Avenue Elementary School restructured to increase the inclusion of students with ESN. The three subsections highlight the participants' perceptions of the restructuring process over the three years.

Beginning of the Transition (Year 1)

In Year 1, leading up to the transition, participants described feeling uncertain and acknowledged their colleagues' uncertainty as well. Once the restructuring was announced, however, "things moved very quickly." In some instances, uncertainty led to resistance from some teachers. According to another special education teacher, in the beginning, "most people fought it, but with a positive attitude." One general education teacher reported that a few teachers were so resistant that they left the school to avoid having to potentially move to the "special education side," which they perceived as having a "hospital-like vibe." Although feelings of uncertainty and resistance were a common theme among the general and special education teachers, the reasons behind the uncertainty and resistance differed between the two groups of teachers.

All three participating general education teachers wondered whether "[inclusion] was going to work." They expressed uncertainty as to how to collaborate with the special education teachers, most of whom they had never met. They also reported observing apprehension or fear in their students, with one teacher sharing the observation that, "At first, when a kid with a disability came to sit in the circle, kids would move away right away, but within six months to a year, that changed." Another general education teacher summed up a sense of uncertainty among the students, stating, "That first year, everyone was just staring at everybody."

Special education teachers expressed different reasons for their uncertainty as they transitioned to the new school. One described the segregated special education center as being "close knit" and highlighted the sense of community. A key fear among the special education teachers was that they would lose something that they valued—their community—and that nothing would replace it. The special education teachers were also concerned with issues of safety, particularly, worrying that their students would be bullied by students without disabilities. Moreover, the special education teachers expressed concern that there would be a decrease in individualization and that the students' needs would no longer be met, as there would be more students in the classroom. One special education teacher described her students as being "very involved" and felt they would not be able to "assimilate with gen ed."

Similar to the teachers, the principal expressed initial concern regarding the merging of the two schools. Echoing the teachers, the principal wondered how two different teams of teachers would work together. In addition, he shared that, at the beginning of the restructuring, he received pushback from some of the parents. He explained:

> At first, the families were very fearful. The parents [of the special education center] were fearful that their children's' needs would not be met, and the services would be reduced. Some of the parents at [the former] Lincoln Avenue Elementary School thought their children would not know what to do to interact with the students with disabilities. But in the end, both groups of parents were happy about and advocated for their school and what the merger had offered their children.

Here, the principal acknowledges changes in parents' attitudes toward the merger, changes that, to a large extent, mirrored those of the teachers. In sum, the participants described this initial phase of restructuring as being characterized by uncertainty, fear, and, in some cases, resistance.

During the Transition (Years 1 and 2)

During the end of Year 1 and into Year 2 of the transition, attitudes started to change among some teachers but uncertainty remained for others. On the other hand, the principal felt that, due to the pre-existing culture of the schools, the stage had been set for success, stating:

> The culture of the two schools prior to the process of merging them was very positive, collaborative, and everyone was student centered. This facilitated the merged schools to develop this shared perspective as we built the norms and culture for the new school.

Although several teachers highlighted the generally "positive" approach of the school staff, even on the part of those teachers who "fought it," this middle period of the transition could be characterized as more fraught. This was particularly true from the perspective of the special education teachers, some of whom felt that they were losing their school community.

Both general and special education teachers expressed confusion about their roles under these new conditions, specifying that their roles were not clearly defined. For example, several teachers questioned who would be responsible for addressing the behavior concerns of specific students. Special education teachers also expressed that co-teaching and facilitating inclusive activities resulted in an increased workload for them. A special education teacher expressed that she would not have sufficient instructional time with her students with disabilities, a sentiment echoed by another special education teacher who stated, "There are only so many minutes in a day." The principal did wonder whether the students' needs as well as those of the teachers and paraprofessionals were being met. In contrast, another special education teacher stated, "I thought this was going to be a heavy transition, but it was really quick."

After the Transition (Year 3)

At the time of the interviews in Year 3, several general and special education teachers expressed that they had accepted their "new normal." The general education teachers expressed an awareness and acceptance of their new roles. They also discussed how the students have accepted each other. The special and general education teachers shared stories of interactions that they observed between students with and without disabilities that never could have occurred before due to the segregated schools. A special education teacher shared, "A lot of the kids have been with our kids for three or four years, and they developed relationships, and it makes it a lot easier, and they are more familiar with the model." A general education teacher stated, "I was skeptical at first, but it actually really works . . . just seeing the relationships the kids have, it might not be the same as a kid in their class, but they actually are friends." The principal provided this summary:

> General education teachers now have a greater appreciation for all the students, and special education teachers have realized that their students can learn some of the same things that nondisabled students can learn. Everyone has learned that disabilities are not an obstacle to thriving and learning. Students and teachers have gotten to know each other, which has helped to break down the barriers.

Despite the positive school climate noted by the principal and the general education teachers, special education teachers continued to express concern about meeting the needs of students with ESN. They noted that some inclusive activities worked for their students, while other activities did not. One special education teacher described the supports needed to engage in activities. "We need more support during recess, lunch and during the activities so that was a transition for the adults too." During our observations of unstructured activities such as lunch, students with ESN required social support from paraprofessionals to engage with their peers without disabilities. However, during our observations, paraprofessionals did not actively facilitate interactions between students with and without disabilities. The issue of ongoing access across multiple settings may reflect the theme of uncertainty in that there may be limited or inadequate knowledge and training in terms of providing access for students with ESN, such as planning for unpredictable interactions.

Theme 2: Uncertainty Around Access Based on Students' Abilities and Activities

The theme of *uncertainty around access based on students' abilities and activities* emerged as we triangulated the data from participants' interviews with classroom observations and scholarship on the Criterion of Least Dangerous Assumption. According to this criterion, without conclusive data, educational decisions should be based on assumptions that will have the least dangerous effect on the student's future independence (Donnellan, 1984; Jorgenson et al., 2007). Some teachers expressed the belief that students with disabilities have difficulty completing academic activities. For example, one special education teacher discussed the need to "bring the instruction down to the student level"; this assumption of student's ability contradicted what we observed in one inclusive art class. During an art lesson, we observed a student with ESN independently complete a Mother's Day art project while another student without a disability had difficulty completing it. In contrast, several students sought help from the student with a disability to complete the task.

A special education teacher reported that, if teachers have "the right mix, it works well. If you don't have the right mix, it's a challenge." Interviews with teachers and our observations reflected the challenge of "finding the right mix" as well as varying interpretations of what this might mean. Two teachers reported that some students with disabilities were included in classes that did not reflect their grade level. This was confirmed in the observation as we observed a fifth-grade student with ESN participating in inclusive activities with a kindergarten class. The fact that the teachers brought this up in the interviews reflects an understanding that this is not best practice, even though it was unclear if they had taken steps to address this concern. This also highlights the difficulty teachers face when they are unsure how to provide a student with ESN access to grade level curriculum and classroom. During the observation, the teachers focused mainly on the fifth-grade student's behavior. Teachers felt that they had difficulty with providing access to grade-level curriculum and meeting the needs of all learners, especially the "more involved students." However, some special education teachers acknowledged strategies they had developed to facilitate inclusive practices with one special education teacher explaining:

> What I do and most teachers do, we have buddies for most of our students. We have the students kinda volunteer to be buddies, and we try to rotate it every month or so. And we want to have it, basically, on a voluntary basis.

In contrast, another special education teacher shared uncertainty regarding the abilities of students with ESN:

My class is a little higher functioning, so I think it's easier, but I think, with some of the other classes, they don't necessarily do it . . . 'cause they are not really capable of being buddies.

Reflecting these assumptions (i.e., lowered expectations for students with disabilities), students with and without disabilities did not use the same academic curricula. The special education teachers reported that they used an "alternate" curriculum for students with ESN. One special education teacher stated, "I feel like we are a little bit isolated from the academics of it because, when they meet and do the trainings, we do our own separate training." During faculty meetings, the special education teachers described receiving professional development training on the "alternate" curriculum separate from the general education teachers.

Theme 3: Perceptions of Additive and Subtractive Lens During the Restructuring Process

This theme of *perceptions of additive and subtractive lens during the restructuring process* emerged from views shared by the participants characterizing the school restructuring in terms of program gains and losses. Participants described ways in which increasing inclusive practices added benefits to the school as well as ways in which they felt that resources or benefits had been subtracted. In terms of a shared benefit, all teachers highlighted increased exposure to and awareness of disabilities among students and staff. All three general education teachers and the principal believed that the school had fostered a climate of increased tolerance and empathy and students had become better citizens as a result. One general education teacher stated, "My students have learned so much more about compassion and treating others with respect and dignity." Another teacher shared a scenario about one of her students without disabilities who would typically get into trouble. In her estimation, inclusive practices provided an opportunity for that student to be a leader and helped to improve that student's behavior. Both general and special education teachers discussed emerging relationships that were once non-existent between students without disabilities and their peers with ESN. The principal suggested, "It's made our school a better school and better for everyone, including the community."

According to one special education teacher, however, "It's not all roses . . . I think it's a work in progress and there's a lot of work to make [inclusion] beneficial for both special and general education." Of note, the general education teachers did not identify any particular losses. Specifically, the special education teachers identified losses that their students might experience as a result of the school restructuring. Special education teachers mentioned examples of program loss, suggesting that the time in general education benefits some students with disabilities more than others. From the perspective of one special education teacher, the restructuring process as a whole contributed to educational losses for students with ESN:

The district doesn't really look at my level kids. . . A very small part of the population of special ed is these really involved kids. That's my class . . . and it's just not easy. They don't really assimilate into what's going on in the general ed and, the district, when they do integration and the stuff they push, they don't really look at this one little bit of population that it isn't necessarily the best for . . . For my level kids, it just doesn't go.

Similarly, a special education teacher felt that the general education classes actually gained extra assistance, while students with disabilities lost instructional time and resources. To illustrate, she pointed out that students without disabilities were now integrated with students with ESN during their physical education (PE) time. Prior to the restructuring, most of the students with ESN

received adapted physical education (APE) by themselves, while the general education teachers themselves were responsible for providing PE for their students. The APE teacher became responsible for a combination of students with and without ESN. The special education teacher felt that this resulted in a loss of individualization for the students with ESN. She described how the APE class time used to address mobility issues for students. She expressed the sentiment, "They're [gen ed] getting extra . . . they kind of win, and we get a little less."

Several special education teachers lamented the loss of their community. As part of the restructuring, assemblies were schoolwide, including both general and special education students and staff. One special education teacher, however, felt that, on multiple occasions, students with disabilities participated only nominally. Another special education teacher reported that only certain individual students with disabilities participated in a holiday school performance. Another special education teacher described how, at one of these "integrated assemblies," the students who used wheelchairs were lined up in the back with obstructed views.

Despite the losses enumerated by one special education teacher, overall, teachers recognized the benefits of providing opportunities for students with and without disabilities to develop friendships and serve as peer models. These opportunities were apparent in the class observations. During an observation, a student with ESN approached one of the researchers to tell him about her friends. The two students took each other's hands and talked for a few minutes. The girl with the disability placed her arm around the other girl's shoulders and walked her over to introduce her to the researcher. The classroom teacher reflected, "This is bigger than just a class together. It's a life lesson. They're going to go through life not being freaked out by people who are different, not just people with disabilities."

Textural and Structural Descriptions

The textural and structural descriptions describe the "what" and "how" it was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). When the staff first learned that they were moving toward more inclusive practices, the principal said, "It's going to happen. Let's make it work." One special education teacher noted that, at the beginning, not all teachers were on board. "The teachers that were more enthusiastic were the ones that volunteered to do it [inclusive activities]. But overtime, most of them are doing it now." Although the staff were apprehensive at the beginning, with the principal's leadership, the district-provided trainings, and the work of an "integration committee," over time, the staff began to make it work. Recognizing that this was as much a "getting to know each other" process for the school staff as for the students, the integration committee was formed, consisting of special and general education teachers and parents, which was intended to offer a voice in the process. A special education teacher stated, "I love the integration at Lincoln Avenue, and I think a lot of it is the principal and the staff that are so positive."

The school community implemented structural and ideological changes to foster a more inclusive climate at Lincoln Avenue Elementary School. Teachers reported that, to address ideological issues, they adopted strategies at the district, school, and classroom levels. The school district brought in outside non-profit organizations to conduct ability-awareness training for students and staff. The general education teachers, in particular, highlighted the importance of this training. They described the training as consisting of outside facilitators' reading children's books about disability, discussing what to expect once students with disabilities joined them, and leading the students through role-play activities. For example, teachers described a facilitator talked to the

students about how some students might make different types of noises or movements and how to respond appropriately while respecting individual student differences.

The teachers and the principal highlighted the importance of the organizations that facilitated ability-awareness training for the staff and students. A special education teacher noted, "They've put a lot of extra resources in [the transition] from the [school] district. They had people come in and train the kids . . . introduce them to the concept of special needs." The teachers reported that the training was effective, as they noticed improvements in the attitudes of students in the upper elementary school as compared to the students who did not receive the training. The principal stated, "We had assistance from the district for professional development that really helped in the beginning. However, the support from the district, which was promised to continue, has dwindled to almost no support at this time."

The school-based integration committee was a key component of the restructuring process. At the time of the interviews, the committee no longer existed. The teachers expressed the need for "a point person or a leader to conduct whole-school trainings" and to reinstate the integration committee. A special education teacher stated, "Everyone has to know what they are doing and why they are doing it." This support would address some of the uncertainty noted by participants during this process. One teacher noted, "I think we are losing the foundation that we had coming in, and now it's kinda just watery." Toward the end of this transition, the teachers felt the core components that made the inclusive practices successful were no longer in place.

In terms of structural changes, the buildings that had previously served as the special education center were repainted (in response to the "hospital-like vibe"). Wheelchair ramps were added to provide access to the original comprehensive campus and restrooms were modified to facilitate the needs of students with ESN. The fence between the two school playgrounds had been removed at the start of the restructuring process and was replaced by a gardening area and a mural made of mosaics created by students. A general education teacher summed up the impact of the transformation: "I mean, it's beautiful. I think we have forgotten about where that gate was. There's a garden growing now where that gate was."

The Essence of the Experience

The essence of the experience is synthesized from the themes and textural and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). The participants' journey progressed from uncertainty to a new normal as the two schools, a special education center and a comprehensive elementary school, became one school. As the participants described the transition process of creating more inclusive opportunities for students with ESN, the teachers and principal reflected on a time of uncertainty and not knowing what it would look like. The perceptions of students' abilities and access to individualization continued to be a concern for special education teachers at the time the study was conducted. There were reported gains and losses during the restructuring process but overall, teachers saw the benefits of inclusion for all students as well as the school community. The essence of this school's experience is that organizational change is uncomfortable but, after the change, come new beginnings and opportunities for everyone.

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to use transcendental phenomenology to understand experiences of the restructuring process as a segregated special education center and a comprehensive elementary

school merged to become one school. Though the transition process started with uncertainty (Theme 1), at the end of the three-year transition process, the teachers and principal expressed that inclusive practices had become the "new normal" at Lincoln Avenue Elementary School. The three-year process was defined by uncertainty and difficulty with organizational change, especially around providing access to students with ESN to grade level curriculum and addressing individual needs.

Special education teachers continued to share concern that not all inclusive activities were appropriate for their students (Ryndak et al., 2014). Theme 2 emerged as some teachers found it difficult to provide access to grade-level curriculum for students with ESN. This aligns with our observations that some students with disabilities were participating in activities below their grade level. Teachers' attitudes toward inclusion impact how inclusive practices are implemented in their classrooms (Avramidis et al., 2019). For all students to be successful in inclusive classrooms, research suggests that stakeholders, such as teachers, adopt the Criterion of Least Dangerous Assumption which provides a framework that they can use to incorporate all students, including students with ESN, in grade-level activities and instruction (Donnellan, 1984; Jorgenson et al., 2007). The assumption is that it is less dangerous to assume the student understands everything than to assume the student understands nothing. Essentially, all students, regardless of their ability, should have access to the age and grade level instruction as their peers without disabilities (Ryndak et al., 2000).

Special education teachers were unsure about how to provide access to the general education curriculum (Peterson, 2016). Mirroring existing research, teachers focused on social inclusion rather than on access to the general education curriculum (Ballard & Dymond, 2017). The participants indicated that students with disabilities needed more support to benefit from the inclusive activities and that their needs were not considered for some activities. Though students with ESN were included in the same spaces, access to the general education curriculum was limited (Agran et al., 2002). Participants also highlighted the importance of the ability awareness training and integration committee. Ability awareness training for the school will support improving attitudes toward inclusion as individuals learn more about the disability (Cameron & Cook, 2013). Prior research has highlighted the importance of educational teams' having sufficient time to adapt materials and collaborate with each other (Finnerty et al., 2019; Friend & Cook, 2013) to ensure meaningful participation for all students.

Implications for Practice, Policy, and Future Research

Understanding the process and participants' experiences is essential to creating and supporting inclusive practices in schools. The implications for practice and policy in teacher education programs and schools include continual training and support for staff and students such as ability awareness training that address deficit views of students with ESN and how to provide access to the general education curriculum. Teachers also learn leadership skills in facilitating the process and understanding how to provide access. Inclusion is not about sharing the same space as students without disabilities but the activities need to be accessible to students of all ability levels.

School staff need to be prepared with planning and instructional strategies to provide accessible and equitable instruction to all students. Administrative support is essential in providing this training to school staff (Alquraini & Gut, 2012). As teachers move toward more inclusive practices, co-planning time is important for general and special education teachers to work together to have common goals and to discuss their roles and responsibilities (Friend & Cook, 2013; Solone

et al., 2020). Dedicated time for co-planning and collaboration may address some of the uncertainty around roles and responsibilities the participants discussed. In addition, special and general education teachers need more professional development on how to create accommodation and modifications to grade level curriculum for students with ESN as opposed to alternate curriculum. Lastly, a key to successful inclusive practices is to have strong, supportive leadership in administrative roles (DeMatthews et al., 2020). The study showed that the administration provided support for the transformation of the school.

Though the combining of an elementary school with a special education center may not be the norm or widely researched, capturing this unique experience provides the education landscape a picture of how inclusion is an ever-evolving construct despite the enactment of IDEA. The transformation of Lincoln Avenue Elementary School over the three years allowed us to see the different layers required to move toward more inclusive practices for students with ESN from the teachers' and principal's perspectives. This experience is situated for the participants at Lincoln Avenue Elementary School but the themes that perpetuate shows that inclusion and moving toward more inclusive practices for students with ESN is not individualized to this school alone. The themes of uncertainty can come from the need to learn more about disabilities through teacher preparation coursework and clinical practice (Campbell et al., 2003).

Limitations

A few limitations should be noted. The first limitation is that teachers self-selected to participate, and the activities that were observed were selected by the teachers. For example, there were not any inclusive activities in traditional academic content areas such as English Language Arts or Mathematics for us to observe. Thus, the study might not capture what occurred during the transition for other staff and activities. Further, part of the study was retrospective, and, therefore, we were not able to capture the transition to inclusive practices in real time. The reports of the experiences of the teachers and the principal may have involved some retrospective bias, and their feelings and perceptions may have changed over time. The last limitation is the language used to describe integration and inclusion. The school intended to move toward more inclusive practices but students with ESN were integrated to the same spaces. Future studies would benefit from a longitudinal design, documenting the transition process at the beginning to understand the differences between integration compared to inclusion and continuing to collect data even after the restructuring is complete.

As more research is conducted to better understand how to provide access to general education curriculum for students with ESN, schools need to provide opportunities for students to have access to same-aged peers without disabilities. There needs to be systematic and sustainable change to place students with ESN in general education (Agran et al., 2020). Considerable variability of policies and practices related to inclusion persists across states and school districts. Even within the same school district, differences exist across schools in terms of their implementation of inclusive educational practices (Brock & Schaefer, 2015; Cosier et al., 2018). Future research should seek to better understand how teachers' attitudes toward inclusion changes over time and identify effective strategies to facilitate the process.

Inclusive education has changed over the last several decades, moving from segregation to integration to inclusion (Morningstar et al., 2015). Inclusion is not a one-time attempt at physically moving students together. Rather, to ensure successful inclusion of students with disabilities,

continual planning and training are needed for students, staff, and parents (Lindsey et al., 2017). Inclusion is successful when there is ongoing preparation and support.

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