

ELEMENTARY SPECIAL AND REGULAR EDUCATION  
IN SEPARATE WORLDS: GRANOVETTER'S  
STRONG AND WEAK TIES

By

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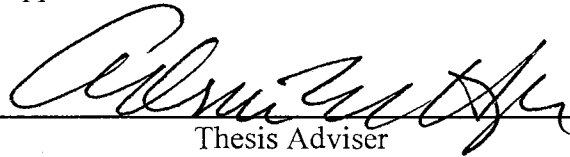
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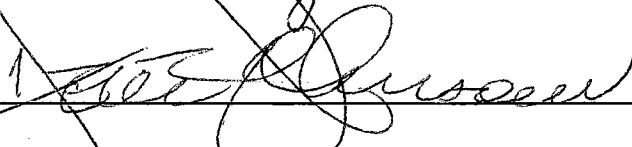


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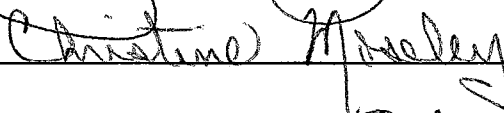
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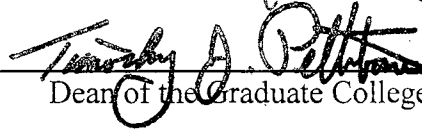
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## CHAPTER I

### DESIGN OF THE STUDY

“A brief and serendipitous perusal of the history of American education is enough to suggest that diversity has been a continual challenge for school leaders in this country” (Riehl, 2000, p. 55). One segment of diversity represented in our classrooms is the various levels of special education students, who have and will continue to pose educational challenges for educators of today and tomorrow.

Given the cultural mix of students, there are few common contents taught to the class as a whole that would conceivably engage all students. Factor in special education students who have increasingly been integrated into regular classes, and the diversity is greater still. (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998, p. 8)

Teaching students in special or “segregated” settings has created concerns, which have surfaced in our court system throughout history. The landmark case for civil rights, *Brown v. Board of Education*, was one of the earliest mandates against racial segregation.

In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education*, in which it was ruled that separate is not equal, provided a powerful push away from segregated options for educating minority students. Apart from challenging exclusionary educational policies for African Americans, this ruling also led the way

toward increased scrutiny of the segregation of students with disabilities.

(Stainback & Stainback, 1996, p.20)

Analogies drawn from *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* were used to build the case that special education students were also victims of unwarranted discrimination (Wright & Wright, 1999). “In the 1980s, some advocates began to use the term *integration*, which borrowed a civil rights focus from race relations and viewed students with disabilities as targets of discrimination” (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997, p. 77). The process towards developing an appropriate educational model for all students continues to evolve through an extensive history in the courts and through legislation aimed at developing support for equity in education, desegregation for students with special needs, and for determining the assessment and placement options for these students (Alper, Schloss, Etscheidt, & Macfarlane, 1995).

Actually, the history of special education predates *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* with reform efforts in place as early as the 1800s (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997). Today the reform bandwagon supporting continued improvement of special education programs is still calling for change and mandates by Congress and by the courts. In 1975, concerns promoting educational equity for all students led Congress to enact legislation such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, P.L. 94-142 (1975), later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. This statute mandated each state, including local school districts, to provide educational opportunities for all children with disabilities (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997). The intent of this law was to promote the concept that all “handicapped” children or “children with disabilities” would have a right to a free, appropriate education in the least restrictive environment (Lipsky &

Gartner, 1997; Stainback & Stainback, 1996; Wright & Wright, 1999). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 is another valuable reform piece of legislation designed to “provide a clear and comprehensive national guidelines for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities” (Getskow & Koneczal, 1996, p.18).

PL 94-142(1975), IDEA (1990), and ADA (1990) established as the uniform standard that the best environment for students with disabilities is one that is “least restrictive.” To ensure a least restrictive environment, public schools must assure that removal of a student with disabilities from his or her regular class may occur only *when* the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in the regular school setting, with the use of special aids and support services, does not achieve satisfactory results (PL 94-142, 1975).

This standard “clearly demonstrates, for us, that Congress recognized that there would be children whose disabilities would preclude a general education placement” (Stainback & Stainback, 1996, p. 45). With this recognition, this section of PL94-142 (1975) has led to a wide ranging continuum of alternative placements aimed at providing a means by which the goal of least restrictive environment can be achieved for all students (Stainback & Stainback, 1996).

The least to most restrictive continuum generally includes regular class, regular class with consultative assistance, regular class with part-time resource room assistance, part day in special classes, full day in special classes, special school, and hospital or homebound placement” (Alper, et al., 1995, p. 5).

Unfortunately, as the literature suggests, schools have not successfully created all of the instructional options available for teachers and students. Currently, part day in special classes (“pull-out” programs) and even more restrictive placements have been the most commonly implemented special education services in our schools. “The child is placed in a regular classroom, but leaves to get help from a special educator in a resource room for one to three periods daily. This – the ‘pull-out’ model – is currently the most common arrangement for students with learning disabilities” (Smith & Strick, 1997, p. 171).

Pull-out programs take the student from his/her regular classroom for special education services for a specified time each day, segregating them from their regular education peers.

The current design of special education is one of programs largely separate from, sometimes parallel to, and occasionally intersecting with the mainstream of education. Presently, it is the inappropriate product of an earlier period, when students with disabilities were excluded from public education. (Stainback & Stainback, 1996, p. 8)

A call for change of this type of special education service is occurring out of concern that the school pull-out programs violate the civil rights of special education pupils. Such pull-out programs seem to serve as *defacto* segregation from their peers (Petch-Hogan, 1999). This type of special education has produced a segregation, which correlates with the problems associated with the racial segregation discussed in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).

Mandates and calls for change have pushed some educators out of their comfort zone. Educators are now charged with the obligation to see past the students' disability status and to recognize and honor needed changes in their classrooms. Educators have been told to focus on pedagogy to include and teach these children in the least restrictive environment in our schools. For most learning disabled students, the ultimate least restrictive environment is in their regular classroom.

A major focus in today's schools is on making the opportunities available to general society accessible to all learners regardless of physical and cognitive limitations. Although the movement toward inclusion has evoked controversy among scholars, administrators, service providers, and family members, it has substantial political and legislative support.

(Alper, et al., 1993, p. 4)

Nonetheless, these legal mandates have been accompanied with a lack of change among educators and other members of our school communities.

This lack of change has shown itself through the emergence of a continuum of beliefs from educators regarding the change of special education services. Different views lie along a continuum where at one end the full inclusionists are those who contend that inclusion should apply to all students with disabilities and pull-out advocates, at the other end, who believe students belong in regular classroom only part of the time (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000). Inclusion advocates believe there should be little differentiation between special and regular education and that a natural merger between these two systems should occur. At the other end of the continuum lies the belief that special education should remain a separate entity, a dual system within our schools, serving

students along side, but not within the regular education classrooms. Critics of inclusion believe that the “entire education system is broken” (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997, p. 206). These critics contend that by returning special education students to the general classroom, they would receive fewer educational services than they did in a separate special education system.

History has viewed special and regular education as “parallel systems” formed to handle separate responsibilities through different programs supported by separate funding (Blenk & Fine, 1995; Morsink, 1984; Winzer & Mazurek, 2000).

Critics speak to the manner in which special education and regular education have developed historically as dual systems. They chide that special education is built to serve the lowest achieving children who are then maintained through a complex interaction of professional beliefs, pedagogy, and legislation. (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000, p. 13)

This fundamental premise of a dual system explains that there are two types of children, those with disabilities and those without disabilities (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997). However, for educators facing the challenges of diversity, these two categories of children are much too narrow, especially the category of “those with disabilities.” Schools are serving children ranging from mild learning disabled to those with mental retardation and extreme physical disabilities.

The learning-disabled student population has experienced its greatest increase since the passage of PL 94-142 (Stainback & Stainback, 1996). Learning disabled refers to a “heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical

abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual” (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000, p. 32). “L.D.” students, as they are called, have traditionally been placed in some settings other than the regular classroom. Approximately one-third of the students are served in general classes, one-third attend pull-out resource rooms, and one-third are members of special classes or are in other, more restrictive, placements (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997; Stainback & Stainback, 1996). Variations of placement choices for the disabled students occur from district to district “despite a federal law that defines disability categories and imposes on all states a common requirement for placing students in the least restrictive environment (LRE)” (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997, p. 6).

Many theorists and practitioners believe the diversity of special and regular education students require equally diverse approaches to teaching. The recognition of each student’s differences often times justifies the distinct separation of regular and special education services. Lipsky and Gartner (1997) believe that “as long as there are people with disabilities, there will be a need for special services that go beyond anything a regular classroom teacher can ordinarily provide” (p. 24).

Though special and regular education teachers have upheld specific and separate roles in our educational system, a review of history reveals that the advancement of cooperative efforts by special and regular educators has moved the dual system closer to becoming one entity designed to equally serve all students. Reflecting back to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), we are reminded that a system based on the premise of separate but equal creates the possibility of an unequal and thereby illegal educational approach for students. The mandates and calls for change in special education of the 1980s and 1990s have gradually led to increased efforts to integrate special and regular



education in the least restrictive environment for all, a move needed to create equal and legally sound opportunities for all students.

Students who can appropriately be placed in a less restricted environment should not be forced into segregated special education classrooms (Alper, et al., 1995). The dual system of special and regular education must change, lest it continues to promote a cycle of perpetual segregation between regular and special education students through continued stereotypic, remedial, pull-out classrooms for these special education students. “Reformers hold that special education and regular education can no longer exist as separate entities; they must join forces to provide the most appropriate education for every child, whether exceptional or normally developing” (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987, p. 368).

Full inclusion advocates have condemned pull-out programs saying they are stigmatizing, ineffective, and segregationist (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995).

The field of special education needs to undergo a paradigm shift from its current status as a system apart from general education to one that is an integral part of general education, providing an array of supports and services within the context of general education programs and facilities.

(Lipsky & Gartner, 1997, p. 49)

Currently, the conceptual shift is calling for a merger between special and regular education. As Blackman (1992) states,

[T] here is nothing pervasively wrong with special education. What is being questioned is not the interventions and knowledge that has been acquired through special education training and research. Rather, what is

being challenged is the location where these supports are being provided to students with disabilities. (p. 29)

The call for this merger, first heard in the early 1980s, was at that time considered a minority point of view (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000). After 1987, support for inclusive schooling began to show progress as the idea became more accepted. “Inclusive schooling makes sense and is a basic right not something one has to earn” (Stainback & Stainback, 1996, p. 8). In the past, exclusion of students has been described as a product of social discontentment and discrimination. Today, inclusive schooling is viewed as a more accepted practice, one that includes everyone, irrespective of talent, disability, socioeconomic background, or cultural origin. It is a classroom situation where educators must seek to meet all students’ needs (Stainback & Stainback, 1996).

Students taught through the inclusionary programs in our schools are exhibiting benefits going far beyond the walls of the classrooms. “When schools include all students, then equality is respected and promoted as a value in society, with the visible results of social peace and cooperation” (Stainback & Stainback, 1996, p. 8). Some theorists and practitioners are now recognizing the benefits of inclusion. Inside and outside our schools, many believe that academically, socially, and occupationally, segregated placements created by pull-out practices can be damaging to students (Stainback & Stainback, 1996). Nonetheless, the merger of regular and special educational systems and the required changes to make the practice of inclusion a reality within our schools has still faced a lack of change by some educators.

Perhaps, the biggest obstacle to change in our classrooms is convincing teachers of the need to abandon their traditional ways of teaching (Ravitch, 2000). Unfortunately,

most districts have not yet created avenues to make this program and ideological change a reality. Many school districts continue to resist the best least restrictive environment scenarios as a part of their vision or mission statement.

While many districts mouth the slogans of inclusion, they have few ideas about how to engage their teaching staffs in the dialogues needed to make inclusion work, or to support their efforts at dialogue and collegial work that are likely to make inclusion happen in positive ways for all the students involved. Special education staffs still do not talk easily or regularly with their regular education colleagues about the collaborative efforts to make these concepts work. (Blenk & Fine, 1995, p. 191)

Promoting the choice of integration of special education students into the regular classroom will require a major system change that promotes and rewards inclusive schooling (Stainback & Stainback, 1996). It is not special education but the total educational system that must change because children with disabilities have been denied access to public education, or, when given access, have received an education that is not equal to that given other children (Lipsky & Gartner, 1989).

In spite of the educator's traditional views of special education, the innovative practice of inclusive schooling is becoming a reality, one that is slowly challenging each individual school in our nation to meet the increasing numbers of special education students coming into our regular classrooms. "Growing numbers of previously excluded students are being integrated into the mainstream of general education" (Lipsky & Gartner, 1989, p. 209).

## Statement of the Problem

Federal policies incorporated in the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94-142, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and American Disabilities Act have called for changes in special education to benefit students in the most reasonable least restrictive environment. With these statutes, Congress has adopted the view that inclusion of students in the regular classroom is the ideal system of educating children in the least restrictive environment at least for most learning disabled students. Despite these clear federal policies and mandates, a large population of learning disabled students continue to be segregated and educated in traditional pull-out classes. These pull-out special education programs exist even though this may not be the optimal least restrictive learning environment for most of the children with learning disabilities.

Granovetter (1973, 1983) explains the need for change and its slow progress in terms of the underdevelopment of weak ties. He suggests that strong ties support the status quo of services and culture for students with disabilities; they maintain and continue the tradition of meeting the needs of students with disabilities in traditional pull-out or special education classrooms, not in the regular classroom. Weak ties, on the other hand, foster the learning necessary to link the traditional classroom culture and its activities with the special education classroom culture and its activities.

Educators stand at a junction of continuing the status quo of services through strong ties or traveling down the path towards a different vision, one which can embrace new learning and change through the development of weak ties. According to Granovetter, the development of these weak ties serves to create avenues to implement

changes needed to support the placement of students in the least restrictive environment along with the training needed for all educators to provide appropriate services in those settings.

### Purpose of the Study

Using Granovetter's (1973,1983) network analysis framework, the purpose of this study was to examine teachers' ties and the impact of these social networks upon the knowledge of and willingness to accept and implement changes needed to obtain the optimal "least restrictive environment" for students with learning disabilities. To implement this purpose, the following research questions were examined:

- 1a. What perceptions, knowledge, and actions do teachers and school principals in a school setting use to place and serve students with learning disabilities in least restrictive environments?
- 1b. With whom do these teachers interact with to gain and share knowledge regarding the types of placements and pedagogical choices used within their classroom for learning disabled students?
2. Specifically, how does Granovetter's (1973; 1983) network analysis (strength of ties) explain those perceptions, knowledge, and activities?
3. What other realities exist which do not fit within Granovetter's frame of reference?
4. How useful is the framework of Granovetter for explaining the realities revealed?

## Orienting Theoretical Framework

Network Analysis (Granovetter, 1973, 1983) served as the theoretical framework for this study. This framework allowed the examination of relationships (ties) among members of a school faculty group to identify patterns of interactions, or absence of interactions, which can facilitate change or promote the status quo among teachers serving special education students within a school site.

According to Granovetter (1973, 1983), it has been determined that strong ties, characterized by relationships with family and close friends, anchor traditional views of segregation while weak ties, characterized by acquaintances or friends of friends provide a bridge to new views and social ideas including integration of all people regardless of ethnicity, gender, social class, or special education children. “[T]he strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie” (1973, p. 1361). Granovetter (1983) points out, “[I]ndividuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends” (p. 202).

Through the conceptual lens of Network Analysis, we are able to reassess our views on special education practices. The pull-out model of serving special education students continues to find support in our schools even though such a model may not be adequately serving these students in their least restrictive environment. Perpetuation of this type of pedagogy that segregates special education students into restrictive environments was explained through the overdevelopment of teachers’ strong ties and the

underdevelopment of teachers' weak ties, both which serve to promote the status quo. Implementation of innovative methods, such as the inclusion model, was explained through the analysis and development of weak ties, which created and promoted reform. Changes in the pedagogical choices for special education students by regular and special education teachers offered evidence of new perceptions, knowledge, and actions which were promoted through the development of weak ties.

### Procedures

The design of this study used naturalistic inquiry techniques including observation, focus group and individual interviews as primary data collection methods. Once collected, the data was analyzed using Granovetter's Network Analysis (1973, 1983) to examine and evaluate teachers' strong and weak ties and the impact of these social networks upon the knowledge of and willingness to accept change and to work towards implementation of such changes needed to obtain the least restrictive environment for students with learning disabilities.

### Researcher

Serving as an elementary educator for 12 years, I stood in a unique position, qualified to serve as the researcher for this project. I have had the privilege of serving students and their families from at-risk learning communities. I have taught in four different grade levels at two different school sites, under the leadership of four different principals. My educational perspective has been greatly impacted by the individuals I have taught and continue to teach. Through a decade of teaching, I have retained the

belief that all children are good, though many have experienced very poor home circumstances, which weigh them down emotionally, socially, and ultimately academically. As a teacher, I continue to look for ways to help each child to find a path to success through school and to ultimately break the cycle of poverty that permeates the walls of the classrooms in which I have taught and continue to teach.

My most recent teaching position served to direct my research. I was co-teaching in an inclusive classroom, serving learning disabled, mentally retarded, Asperger's, and "regular" education students in the same room. Though the students are advancing academically and socially, we are the only teaching team in our school site who has implemented such a program design. Our school administrator is very supportive of change and has promoted such a change to the other special education teachers. As a result, some inclusive strategies were started, but unfortunately some of these inclusion programs have now returned back to the traditional "pull-out" special education services.

It is my assumption that a teacher's experience and work relations guide his or her classroom's pedagogy and that these same experiences and relations can create barriers blocking the promotion of new, innovative strategies. Barricades constructed upon experiences divert teachers back to the support of the status quo within their classrooms. "The status quo often wins out over fundamental change" (Villa & Thousand, 1995, p. 31). Status quo is perhaps less burdensome than change for students as well as teachers.



### Data Needs

To more fully understand the social networks of teachers' strong and weak ties and the impact that these network associations have upon the knowledge of and willingness to accept and implement changes needed for students with learning disabilities, the perceptions, knowledge, and actions of regular and special education teachers and school administrator were essential. The perspective from the school district's special education director was also needed as it helped develop the background and the future of the current policies and visions special education has for our schools. "It is in fact the strength of the interview conversation to capture the multitude of subjects' views of a theme and to picture a manifold and controversial human world" (Kvale, 1996, p.7).

### Data Sources

Data sources included primarily three groups: (1) the building administration including the principal and counselor, (2) special and regular education teachers, and (3) the school district's special education director. For this study, the school site was located in the northeastern section of a midwestern state. The school was chosen because it serves special education students through various models including inclusion and pull-out programs. This site also serves a very diverse student population, specifically a large special education population with five special education teachers serving learning disabled, mentally retarded, and emotionally disturbed students. An additional respondent from the school district's special education department was also sought.

### Data Collection Strategies

Marshall and Rossman (1995) maintain that designing a study with multiple cases, informants, and methods of gathering data can strengthen the usefulness of the study's findings for other settings. Data informants came from three vastly different perspectives and the three data collection strategies, focus groups and individual interviews and the development of sociograms, developed a triangulation of data sources, which brought a greater breadth to my study (Creswell, 1994).

Before proceeding with the interviews in this study, I submitted my proposal to the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board and received approval to proceed with my data collection processes (see Appendix A) At the onset of each focus group, respondents were informed of the study and voluntary participation was stressed. Each respondent signed an informed consent form stating their understanding of their participation (see Appendix B).

Focus Group Interviews. "Focus groups are basically group interviews, alternation between a researcher's questions and the research participant's responses. Reliance is on interaction within the group, based on topics that are supplied by the researcher who typically takes the role of a moderator" (Morgan, 1997, p. 2). Data collected from focus groups of this study provided a range of ideas about the knowledge and perceptions regarding special education philosophy and the currently implemented services and placement for special education services.

In focus groups, the goal is to let people spark off of one another, suggesting dimensions and nuances of the original problem that any one

individual might not have thought of. Sometimes a totally different understanding of a problem emerges from the group discussion. (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 140)

As part of my data collection, I conducted two focus group interviews as follows:

- a. Teachers implementing inclusion strategies for their special education students; and
- b. Teachers implementing pull-out strategies for their special education students.

These two groups of teachers were identified and reviewed according to their instructional methodology and placement of their special education students, which promoted homogeneity within each group. Focusing on these identifiable groups facilitated a focused discussion regarding specific criteria about the services and placements of special education students (Greenbaum, 1998). “Group discussions provide direct evidence about similarities and differences in the participant’s opinions and experiences as opposed to reaching such conclusions from post hoc analyses of separate statements from each interviewee” (Morgan, 1997, p. 10). These group discussions were followed-up by individual interviews, as needed to clarify information obtained from the group sessions. The focus group protocol is attached (see Appendix C).

Individual Interviews. Interviewing is a good tool for “accessing people’s perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality” (Punch, 1998, pp. 174-175). Follow-up individual interviewing strategies were used to obtain

individual's demographic information and to clarify information regarding knowledge, perceptions, and currently implemented instructional practices and placements for special education students in their classroom. Rubin and Rubin (1995) remind us that "understanding is achieved by encouraging people to describe their worlds in their own terms" (p. 2). "Follow-up questions pursue the implications of answers to the main questions. Follow-ups examine central themes or events, or ask for elaboration about core ideas and concepts" (p. 146). Based on the interviews of regular and special education teachers and the school administration, I was able to identify emerging themes supporting the emerging beliefs, expectations, knowledge, and pedagogical choices for learning disabled students. Specific demographic and clarifying questions were individually proposed to the respondents during these individual interviews (see Appendix D).

Sociograms. A sociogram is a visual organizer that maps out the patterns of interaction, similarities, and differences among a group of people and shows a pattern of interaction. According to Lindzey & Byrne (1968), sociograms are designed to "provide a sensitive and objective picture of the interpersonal relations existing within a group and between pairs of individuals" (p. 452).

In this study, teachers were asked to name those people with whom they shared teaching philosophies, gained instructional information, and whom they most closely collaborated with regarding educational issues. These sociograms were used to determine the social networks present in the school and the identification of the strong and weak ties within this network.

## Data Analysis

In assessing and evaluating the data collected, Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggest that, “after each interview, and after each cluster of interviews, look over your transcripts to figure out what you should follow up on. Look for themes, ideas, concepts, and events and prepare additional questions on those that address your research concerns” (p. 151). This type of data analysis continued throughout the study and as the study progressed, central themes and theories emerged.

In the early interviews, the researcher begins to test ideas of why things happen and chooses the concepts and themes to be explored. Then he or she designs subsequent interviews to examine these explanations and preliminary themes. The preliminary themes suggest what questions to ask; what is then heard indicates how to modify the themes and which themes to explore in more depth. The iterative process continues as the newly modified themes are tested and combined into a minitheory that is then retested through further interviews. (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 56)

I analyzed and identified these emerging themes from the individual and focus group interview data through a coding system. “Codes are tags, names or labels, and coding is therefore the process of putting tags, names or labels against pieces of data” (Punch, 1998, p. 204). The coding of the focus groups were more complex as three factors influence the emphasis placed on a particular code: “how many groups mentioned the topic, how many people within each of these groups mentioned the topic, and how

much energy and enthusiasm the topic generated among the participants” (Morgan, 1997, p. 63).

After the data from this interview process was collected and coded and emerging themes, or “statements that explain why something happened or what something means” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 57) are identified, the Network Analysis framework from Mark Granovetter (1973; 1983) was ultimately used as the lens to view the anomaly. Data collected from individual and focus interviews was cast against this Network Analysis framework to analyze the strength of ties among members of this school faculty in relation to their perceptions, knowledge, and actions given within the special education arena. “This can be done by investigating the possible triads consisting of strong, weak, or absent ties among A, B, and any arbitrary chosen friend of either or both” (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1363). An examination of these relations was used to develop network maps, or sociograms, illustrating shared philosophies, those whom the respondents gain information, and the presence of weak and strong ties within this school’s network.

#### Research Criteria

“Establishing trustworthiness enables a naturalistic study to make a reasonable claim to methodological soundness” (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 131). Naturalistic inquiry researchers establish trustworthiness through credibility, applicability through transferability, consistency through dependability, and neutrality through confirmability (p. 132). “The process of inquiry for the naturalistic researcher becomes one of developing and verifying shared constructions that will enable the meaningful expansion of knowledge” (p. 21).

## Credibility

Credibility is needed to show confidence in the truth of the study's data, which became evident through a clear correlation between the respondents' perceptions and the researcher's interpretation and presentation of these perceptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is a relationship of "compatibility of the constructed realities that exist in the minds of the inquiry's respondents with those that are attributed to them" (Erlandson et al, 1993, p. 30). The strategies used for accomplishing credibility are prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks.

First, prolonged engagement was easily satisfied at this study's school site by reason that I was a teacher in this site, thus allowing me ample time to "understand daily events in the way that persons who are part of that culture interpret them" (Erlandson, et al, 1993, p. 30). But in this setting of familiarity, it becomes critical of the need to separate my biases from the information obtained by the teachers and administration and strive to accurately and objectively portray what these research subjects disclose. By remaining conscious of the possibility of bias, credibility of the research will be established.

Triangulation is a mode of improving the credibility of findings and interpretations. "Perhaps the best way to elicit the various and divergent constructions of reality that exist within the context of a study is to collect information about different events and relationships from different points of view" (p. 31). The multiple sources in this study included a district special education administrator, school administrators, including principal and counselor, and special, and regular educators, which adequately

presented data from various perspectives. “By this method, the researcher seeks out several different types of sources that can provide insights about the same events or relationships” (Erlandson, et al., 1993, p. 115). Focus group interviews, individual interviews, and the development of sociograms displaying the social networks were the various methods conducted to produce information in a more reliable and objective way (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Peer debriefing and member checks were also used to achieve credibility. Peer debriefing allowed an outside professional to analyze the study and provide feedback about the findings and the interpretations.

Occasionally the researcher should step out of the context being studied to review perceptions, insights, and analyses with professionals outside the context who have enough general understanding of the nature of the study to debrief the researcher and provide feedback that will refine and, frequently, redirect the inquiry process. (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 31)

Dr. Adrienne Hyle, my dissertation advisor, served as this professional.

Credibility was maintained in this study through member checks. Member checks allowed respondents to verify the interpretations and conclusions of the research upon completion of the study, which is important because the realities of the study were developed from these individuals (Erlandson et al., 1993).



### Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which a study's findings can be applied with other respondents in other situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thick, rich description and purposive sampling are needed to help facilitate transferability.

Because transferability in a naturalistic study depends on similarities between sending and receiving contexts, the researcher collects sufficiently detailed descriptions of data in context and reports them with sufficient detail and precision to allow judgments about transferability.

(Erlandson, et al., 1993, p. 33)

Purposive sampling permits the researcher to select respondents that have a connection to the purpose of the study. It is a sampling procedure that "is governed by emerging insights about what is relevant to the study and purposively seeks both the typical and the divergent data that these insights suggest" (p. 33).

### Dependability

Dependability criterion calls for consistency in findings from one similar context and similar respondents to another. Changes in methods and constructions of a study may hinder the consistency of the results if the study were to be replicated in another setting under the same conditions with the same subjects. Dependability in a naturalistic study refers to the reliability and trackability of the research process. This research criterion is verified through a dependability audit. An "audit trail," maintained throughout the study, provided "documentation (through critical incidents, documents, and interview notes) and

a running account of the process (such as the investigator's daily journal" of the inquiry)" (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 34). The information for this audit trail was kept in a weekly journal, or "reflexive journal," describing the methods used and personal reactions to the interviews. "The reflexive journal supports not only the credibility but also the transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study" (p. 143).

### Confirmability

Confirmability is the degree to which the results are the product of the focus of inquiry and not the biases held by the researcher. "The naturalistic researcher does not attempt to ensure that observations are free from contamination by the researcher but rather to trust in the 'confirmability' of the data themselves" (Erlandson, et al., 1993, p. 34). To accomplish this task, I provided an audit trail of interview transcripts, sociograms of the network analysis of teachers and administrators, tapes, notes, analysis, reflexive journaling and other documentation. This audit trail enabled the auditor "to determine if the conclusions, interpretations, and recommendations can be traced to their sources and if they are supported by the inquiry" (p. 35).

### Significance of the Study

The findings of this study have hopefully produced significant contributions to the areas of theory, research, and practice regarding the need and challenge to expand the inclusion of learning disabled students in a classroom with all other students. I am in hopes that this study has offered theoretical and practical tools that might help us to recognize the need to change our perceptions and knowledge regarding special education

services and to give insight toward the promotion of change in actions within our special education placement and service options. Through the lens of Network Analysis, I brought knowledge regarding a greater need to form paths or bridges through the formation of weak tie development as an avenue to promote change in any arena of education, but specifically within the programs of special education.

### Theory

This study explored the usefulness of Granovetter's (1973, 1983) network analysis framework as an explanation for the impact of social networks upon the acceptance and implementation of change needed to expand the inclusion theory and to obtain in both form and substance the optimal least restrictive environment for each learning disabled student. This framework provided a means to identify and examine the ties of teachers at the school site of this study to determine their strength in relationship to time, intensity, intimacy, and reciprocity (Granovetter, 1973).

### Research

The review of literature discussed the history of special education legal mandates and the multi-faceted reasons why attention towards change in special education services is warranted. This study contributed information to our knowledge base regarding the impact of social networks and the lack of change, specifically to the changes regarding the special education arena in our schools.

## Practice

This study holds the potential to enhance the practice of education by providing district leaders, school administrators, and special and regular educators with improved insight into social networks and their relationship to educational change. Granovetter argues that individuals with weak ties are the most productive channels through which change can be disseminated (Granovetter, 1973; Lagemann & Miller, 1996).

The solution is not how to climb the hill of getting more innovations or reforms into the educational system. We need a different formulation to get at the heart of the problem, a different hill, so to speak. We need, in short, a new mindset about educational change. (Fullan, 1993, p. 3)

Other pragmatic strategies, such as professional development opportunities can be presented to disseminate the information obtained through this study. These opportunities will afford increased knowledge of special education legal mandates and the impact of Granovetter's (1973, 1983) strong and weak ties to obtain change. Participants of these professional development opportunities will develop weak ties between the participants, which will promote new perceptions and actions needed to obtain change in their schools, specifically change needed to reach the optimal least restrictive environment goal for each student.

## Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' ties and the impact of the social networks upon the knowledge of and willingness to accept and implement changes

needed to obtain the optimal least restrictive environment for students with learning disabilities. Granovetter's (1973, 1983) network analysis served as the lens through which to examine the perceptions, knowledge, and action of educator's involved in the facilitation of special education placement and services.

### Reporting

Chapter II of this dissertation discusses the literature concerning Network Analysis (Granovetter, 1973, 1983), needs and current practices of special education students, legal mandates and court cases regarding the placement of special education students. Chapter III presents the research methods used for data collection and Chapter IV presents the data collected through the interview process. Analysis and interpretation of the study's findings will comprise Chapter V. Chapter VI will include the summary, implications, conclusions, discussion, and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Philosophies and practices that direct and command special education continue to evolve from a complex history of laws and community biases. Out of these biases, modified by emerging legal standards, the progression of student acceptance and educational placement opportunities has progressed from a model of total exclusion from public education, to a segregated placement within the regular education environment, to a partial placement within the regular education network. Movement towards a more inclusive educational model has resulted out of litigation and federal mandates and have led to the development of a continuum of special education placement choices, intended to promote the best inclusive educational experience for each student. “Federal law and numerous court cases emphasize that students be placed in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their educational characteristics” (Alper et al., 1993, p. 5). This chapter will review related literature on the (1) history of inclusion, (2) continuum of special education services, (3) least restrictive environment, (4) inclusive education model, and (5) Granovetter’s (1973; 1983) Network Analysis, strong and weak ties which I believe can promote or stagnate the promotion of inclusion of learning disabled students in our classrooms.

## History of Inclusion

Efforts towards integrating all students to promote the best inclusive educational model have a long history, albeit a history that did not originate with the objective of assisting students with disabilities. For example, in 1779, Thomas Jefferson led one of the earliest battles, this one to obtain inclusion of students from poor families. It was Jefferson who “proposed the first state-supported education plan in Virginia in an attempt to allow children, other than those from wealthy families, an opportunity to receive educational services” (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000, p. 28).

Despite the early signs that seemed to favor a more inclusive system of education, certain students faced separation through officially sanctioned segregated educational placements for students classified as African American, Native American, or disabled. Equal education among the special education student population has come slower than with all other minority groups. Today, however, this student population with different levels of disability is attracting greater attention. Through increased advocacy, many forces are shaping and changing special education programs, services, and placement options to maximize the educational protection and opportunities for students with disabilities.

Although numerous factors have influenced the system as it exists today, few have had as significant an effect as federal legislation and litigation.

The foundations that undergird the field are reflected in the turbulent and triumphant history of special education and civil rights law. (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000, p. 41)

The following is a brief overview of the influential court decisions and federal litigation that have materially affected the educational process of students with disabilities.

The starting place must rest with *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*. This 1954 Supreme Court decision was brought about by the Civil Rights movement to challenge the prevalent segregated educational system for African American students. In *Brown*, the court pronounced “[T]he doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place in the field of public education, since separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (Brown v. Board of Educ., 347 U.S. 483, 1954). The Supreme Court ruled that African American children had a constitutional right to equal educational opportunities. In the *Brown* decision, the

U.S. Supreme Court, Mr. Chief Justice Warren, held that segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other tangible factors may be equal, deprives the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities, in contravention of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. (p. 483)

Under the Fourteenth Amendment it is unlawful to arbitrarily discriminate against any group of people” (Friend & Bursuck, 1996, p. 7) including students with disabilities. The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment reads, “[N]o state shall . . . deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

*Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* had an immediate expansive effect of identifying and supporting the break down of all traditional education exclusionary policies toward minority students including those students with disabilities. It led to a



growing belief that segregating children in different schools should not be allowed or have any part in public education. This landmark decision has “led the way toward increased scrutiny of the segregation of students with disabilities” (Stainback & Stainback, 1996, p. 20). If the judicial philosophy expressed in *Brown* that “separate but equal” is “inherently unequal” in the context of educational opportunities for Blacks, the rational jurisprudence must also apply to other groups facing segregation from the central student population.

Not surprisingly, litigation based on the *Brown* legal precedent was initiated by parents of children with disabilities. School districts began facing lawsuits challenging the segregation of disabled children from the general student population. Thus, the beginning of a flourishing evolution of federal mandates in the educational arena, grounded in federal civil rights cases, has brought increased recognition for human dignity, which has led to more extensive examination of the exclusionary policies and a call for material change. As the Blacks did in *Brown*, the beginning legal efforts to improve educational opportunities on behalf of students with disabilities focused first on gaining access to public education for all (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000).

Some ten years after *Brown*, Congress enacted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965). ESEA, Public Law 89-10, provided a comprehensive plan for readdressing educational inequalities for economically underprivileged children. ESEA, as the statute was refined, became the statutory basis upon which Congress’ special education legislation was drafted. Following ESEA, Congress quickened the pace toward legislation requiring a more inclusive and more equitable educational system.

In 1966, Congress amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (P.L. 89-750) to address the educational needs of children with disabilities, establishing the first federal grant program to encourage states to “assist them in initiating, expanding, and improving programs and projects for the education of children with disabilities” (Turnbull, 1993, p. 13). This 1966 Act also established the National Council of Disability (NCD) with a purpose of promoting policies, programs, practices, and procedures that guarantee equal opportunity for all individuals with disabilities, regardless of the nature or severity of the disability; and to empower these individuals to achieve inclusion and integration into all aspects of society.

Two years later, in 1968, Congress amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act Amendments (P.L. 90-247), establishing a set of programs that supplemented and supported the expansion and improvement of special education services, which later became known as “discretionary.” Then, in 1970, Congress further amended the ESEA Act, P.L. 91-230, to allow the establishment of a core grant program for local education agencies and the authorization of a number of discretionary programs. The 1966 and 1970 ESEA laws were developed to encourage states to increase special education resources (Turnbull, 1993). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act and its amendments would ultimately be used as a springboard for the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975.

Prior to the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children, the courts had already entered the legal thicket for the protection of disabled children. In *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia* (1972), the Federal Court ruled that no child should be excluded from a regular public school setting unless the child was first provided with

adequate alternative educational services designed to meet the child's unique educational and social needs. As reviewed by Winzer,

*Mills v. the Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972) found that the exclusion of children with disabilities from free, appropriate public education is a violation of the due process and equal protection clauses of the Fourteenth amendment to the Constitution, and it expanded the class of students with disabilities beyond mental retardation to include all types of disabilities. (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000, p. 42)

The court further held that the student's placement in a regular class with appropriate support services was preferable to a special pull-out class for students who had disabilities (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000).

With the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (PL 93-112) "disability advocates won a major victory including its civil rights component in Section 504" (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997, p. 75). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a civil rights law designed to prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability in public and private school programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance. Section 504 ensured equal opportunity in all school activities for all school-aged children (Friend & Bursuck, 1996; Melvin, 1995; Turnbull, 1993). This legislation, advancing inclusive educational systems, require that a recipient of federal funds educate, or provide for the education of each qualified handicapped person in its jurisdiction in the same classroom with students not handicapped to the maximum extent appropriate to the needs of the handicapped person.

This 1973 legislation requires a free appropriate public education to individuals with disabilities comparable to that provided to students without disabilities, including individually designed instruction to entitled students (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000).

Eligibility for these educational services cover any student who: “(1) has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, (2) has a record of such impairment, or (3) is regarded as having such an impairment” (p. 44).

Nonetheless, despite all the attention Congress and the courts have placed on the problem, more than one million children with disabilities still faced exclusion from attending public schools. In 1975, Congress addressed this statistic with passage of the Education For All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142), another product of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s when advocates turned to the courts and to Congress to promote changes for the benefit of the disabled student population. The Education for All Handicapped Children’s Act was intended to guarantee “a free, appropriate public education to all children and youth with disabilities” (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000, p. 42). Specifically, Congress expressed a national policy where students would be educated “to the maximum extent appropriate” and that special needs children must be “educated with children who are not handicapped” (p. 42). Most importantly, as this study will confirm, Congress, with its 1975 legislation, rightly rejected the assumption that children with disabilities were unteachable, and therefore should be excluded from the general education environment” (Petch-Hogan & Haggard, 1999, p. 128).

During consideration of Public Law 94-142, Congress sought explanations concerning the still existing segregation of disabled students in public school. What

Congress found that too many children were “denied access to an education without due process of law” (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000, p. 20). Thus, with passage of PL94-142, Congress established a process “by which state and local educational agencies may be held accountable for providing educational services for all handicapped children” (Wright & Wright, 2000, p. 10). PL94-142 has outlined the “entire foundation on which current special education practice rests” (Friend & Bursuck, 1996, p. 8). This special education foundation was later reauthorized as the “Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)” in 1990 (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000; Lipsky & Gartner, 1997; Stainback & Stainback, 1996).

A short glimpse at Oklahoma’s Constitutional history will illustrate the critical time span between the time of exclusion and the more advanced and fairer period of inclusion. When Oklahoma’s Constitution was adopted in Convention at Guthrie on July 16, 1907 and ratified on September 17, 1907, it mandated a separation and exclusion of students in public schools based solely on the color of a student’s skin. Article I, Section 5 of Oklahoma’s Constitution reads:

Provision shall be made [by the Legislature] for the establishment and maintenance of a system of public schools, which shall be open to all the children of the state and free from sectarian control; and said schools shall always be conducted in English: Provided, that nothing herein shall preclude the teaching of other languages in said public schools. And provided, further, that this shall not be construed to prevent the establishment and maintenance of separate schools for white and colored children.

Even after the Supreme Court had rejected the “separate but equal doctrine” in the *Brown* case in 1954, Oklahoma’s constitutional mandate for a separation of students by race continued until November 7, 1978. On that date, the people of Oklahoma voted in favor of an amendment to Article I, Section 5 of the Constitution thereby removing the language that required the “separate schools for white and colored children.”

Although this constitutional advancement towards inclusion of students in public schools without regard to the color of the skin of students, the inclusion of students with disabilities was still evolving, mainly through federal legislation, including the important Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990. Under this reauthorized federal law, all children with disabilities were guaranteed a federally protected civil right to have available to them a free appropriate public education that met their education and related services needs in the least restrictive environment possible. The statute provided that special education children will be educated in the general curriculum to the maximum extent possible. (Stainback & Stainback, 1996). “States are required to ensure the provision of full educational opportunity to all children with disabilities” (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000, p. 45). Additionally, the statute further required that a variety of service delivery and placement options be available in each school district and site in order to satisfy the Congressional legal mandate for each student situation (Wright & Wright, 2000).

Kauffman and Hallahan, 1995, forcefully stressed the importance under Congressional mandate as follows:

Under IDEA, every student whose education can be achieved satisfactorily in the regular classroom is entitled to be placed there. To insist that any

one placement must be the only one for all children, regardless of unique needs or disabilities, is contrary to common sense and to law. Such decisions ought to be made on the basis of what is likely to be, and then shown to be, efficacious for each individual student. (p. 89)

In an effort to ensure compliance with its mandates, Congress developed a detailed system of legal checks and balances referred to as “procedural safeguards” to protect disabled children and their families. “The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 maintains the goals of access and due process while focusing on accountability and improved outcomes” (Wright & Wright, 2000, p. 20). Both initiatives, PL94-142 (1975) and IDEA (1990), support education for students with disabilities in the setting of the general classroom when at all possible.

In response to the need of integrating special and regular education students, the Regular Education Initiative (REI) of 1986 was issued, calling for regular and special educators to share in the responsibility of educating students with learning problems. “The purpose of the REI was to develop ways to serve students with disabilities in general classrooms by encouraging special education programs to develop a partnership with general education” (Stainback & Stainback, 1996, p. 22). Regular Education Initiative has been used as a vehicle to promote change in the servicing of special education students. In 1995, Sale and Carey compared the Regular Education Initiative to the Full-inclusion Initiative. “Although conceptual overlap exists between the two initiatives, the former has generally dealt with students with mild to moderate disabilities, whereas the latter has generally focused on students with severe disabilities” (p. 6). Still

as a common theme, REI originated with the least restrictive environment element of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Sale & Carey, 1995).

In 1990, Congress enacted the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, PL 101-336), a statute intended to “provide a clear and comprehensive national mandate to end discrimination against individuals with disabilities giving them the same protection in our society available to other individuals protected by civil rights laws” (Stainback & Stainback, 1996, p. 10). Though the ADA is not directly focused on educational issues, it certainly applies to the issues faced within the special education arena, clarifying the civil rights of all individuals, including those with disabilities (Friend & Bursuck, 1996).

The ADA expresses the belief that “the way to promote productivity and independence of people with disabilities is to remove the barriers that our society has created and restore the rights of citizens with disabilities to partake of the opportunities available to Americans” (Stainback & Stainback, 1996, p. 11). Stainback and Stainback (1996) state that all students should be able to attend their neighborhood school and that it becomes the school’s responsibility to adapt the curriculum and placement options to meet the diverse needs of each student.

#### Continuum of Special Education Services

Since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Act (PL94-142), nearly two decades ago, the focus on special education for individual students with learning disabilities (LD) has shifted from an emphasis on what and how to teach to an emphasis on where to teach. (Baker & Zigmond, 1995, p. 163)



Sarason (1996) expressed the belief that the intention of this legislation was to insure a “tailor-made program” to fit the individual needs of each child.

The child’s program has to meet the criterion of the least restrictive alternative. It would no longer be possible for the school to place a child in a program because of his or her diagnostic label; placement would be decided by the needs of the individual child as those needs would be studied and formulated by a team of school personnel. (p. 235)

According to Osborne’s 1997 legal commentary,

[S]chool districts must maintain a continuum of placement alternatives and the statute states that the LRE (least restrictive environment) provision applies across the continuum. Specifically, the IDEA requires states to establish procedures assuring that students with disabilities are educated to the maximum extent appropriate with students who do not have disabilities. ( p. 1)

Though a continuum of placement options should be available to special education students, a study in 1987 showed that 74% of special education students were still being served in pull-out or separate special education programs (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). This study rejected the common pull-out instructional placement strategy as ineffective and “neither administratively nor instructionally supportable when measured against legal requirements, effective schools research or fiscal consideration” (p. 375).

The individual instructional design and placement decisions become more challenging to schools in view of the number of special education students being served in our schools has increased by more than 1.3-1.4 million since the passage of PL94-142

(Lipsky & Gartner, 1997; Stainback & Stainback, 1996). The greatest increase in the number of these students has been among those labeled “learning disabled” (Stainback & Stainback, 1996). In 1996, Friend and Bursuck defined learning disabled students as having “dysfunctions in processing information typically found in language-based activities. They have average or above average intelligence, but they often have significant problems learning how to read, write, and compute” (p. 15). As these special education numbers continue to increase, changes in special education programs will need to continue evolving. Past programs will offer valuable steps in the evolution of effective education, but these programs will quickly become obsolete as the types of placement and service choices for students with disabilities continue to rapidly change with a more inclusive focus (Friend & Bursuck, 1996).

The law, established through IDEA, clearly states “that special education is not limited to traditional special education classes. Special education should include a range of services designed to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities” (Wright & Wright, 2000, p. 12). The continuum of special education placements represents various opportunities for learning disabled students to be educated with the least amount of restrictions. “Placements must be determined only after the careful study of each individual child or youth. Some students with disabilities may require placements outside of the regular class. Therefore, the continuum of services must be maintained” (Alper, et al., 1995, p. 11). Unfortunately, though literature supports the premise that many learning disabled students should be educated next to their non-disabled peers, the success of such a classroom placement depends on the school’s overall atmosphere, including attitudes of special and regular educators (Alper, et al., 1995). “While a

number of critical elements of effective teaching with culturally diverse students have been identified, we know much less about why some teachers come to adopt culturally relevant pedagogy while others may not” (Stodolsky & Grossman, 2000, p. 127).

Teachers’ choices of instructional placements for special education students lay along a student placement continuum, with the full inclusionist’s beliefs at one end, partial inclusion supporters’ beliefs next and then those supporters of a dual system of special and regular education, who promote pull-out programs for special education students, on the other end (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000). On a more detailed analysis, Wendy Dover (1994) outlines a continuum of special education services as follows:

The Full Inclusion Model supports the placement of special education students in a regular classroom 100% of the day. The Collaborative Model also supports inclusion of special education students with the educational staff working together to meet individual needs of student. The Supported Instruction Model promotes inclusion of special needs students in the classroom, providing support services within regular classroom instruction. Further down the continuum lies the Social Mainstreaming Model where the special education students are included during regular classroom instruction to provide them with appropriate exposure to nondisabled peers. The Home Class Model includes the special education students only during the opening and closing classroom activities. The Pull-Out (Resource) Model supports special education academic instruction outside the regular classroom when needed. The Nonacademic Model allows the students to participate in classes such as art, music, and physical education, but are taught their academic subjects in a separate setting. The Mainstreaming Model allows the special education students to be a part of regular education activities as long as behavior and

performance is non-disruptive. The Self-Contained Model is a more restrictive model where the special education student learns in a separate room 100% of each day (Dover, 1994).

With all the diverse instructional and placement models available, IDEA (1990) explicitly states that the least restrictive environment provision should apply across the continuum of placement alternatives, depending on the individual needs of the child. “Specifically, the IDEA requires states to establish procedures assuring that students with disabilities are educated to the maximum extent appropriate with students without disabilities” (Osborne & Dimattia, 1994, p. 6). Though these federal mandates are clear about the requirements and expectations of educating students with disabilities, specific decisions regarding the types of special education placement and services these students will receive will be based on a school district’s service delivery system.

Wright and Wright (2000) believe further special education litigation will “target special education programs that are not research-based and school districts that fail to use effective educational practices” (p. 20). The placement of a special education student can drive the services he/she receives. It is still troubling that many school districts are still developing special education programs with few to no placement options, which often do not meet the individual needs and rights of each student as the law requires. Therefore, as Winzer reports:

More litigation is focusing on placement decisions and how placement decisions are made. Many school districts design “one-size-fits-all” special education programs and “shoehorn” special needs children into these programs. Many inappropriate placement decisions are fueled by

administrative convenience. “One-size-fits-all” programs do not meet the unique needs of children with disabilities, as the law requires. (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000, p. 21)

Special education placement decisions are meant to be individualized, therefore the guidelines concerning the amount of inclusion for each student are vague, even through the outlined regulations of IDEA (Osborne, 1997). The placement patterns of special education students are now based upon “student age, disability condition, and differing state practices,” (Stainback & Stainback, 1996, p. 4), with the most striking discrepancy evident among the implementation of state practices. For example, the percent of learning disabled students found in the regular classroom ranged from 2.37 percent in California to 93.59 percent in Vermont (Stainback & Stainback, 1996).

While states are offering a wide variety of options for adapting learning environments to meet the needs of an individual student, the frame of reference in many classrooms continues to be the standard curriculum (McGregor, 1998). Through a series of legal mandates, a continuum of services has been designed, but these services have not been fully implemented or offered throughout our educational systems. “The inclusion of students with disabilities is not merely an issue of a student’s physical placement. The presence of students with disabilities in general education classrooms stimulates educators to consider the match between classroom climate, curriculum, teaching practices, and the needs of students with identified learning differences” (McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998, p. 5).

## Least Restrictive Environment

In IDEA (1990), the legally controlling term, “least restrictive environment,” is defined in Section 300.550 as follows:

Each public agency shall ensure that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are non-disabled; and that special classes, separate schooling or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

Based upon this expressed Congressional policy, it seems clear that the intent of the law is to limit removal from the regular education environment to the maximum extent possible (Arnold & Dodge, 1994). Meeting this optimal least restrictive environment for each student without a variety of placement and service options becomes a true challenge for educators. “Individualized placement decisions can be made only if there is a continuum or variety of placements from which to select” (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995, p. 86).

The integration of excluded students into the mainstream of our education system is not a new concept. Throughout history, there have been many movements promoting greater integration of more students into the mainstream (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000). Unfortunately, these changes have varied in degree from state to state, leaving some

special education students in a more restrictive learning environment than needed and more than intended by the federal mandates. As student population dynamics have changed, and schools have experienced increased numbers of special education students, educators continue to offer the same services today as they did yesterday, regardless of the mandates. Educational systems have not caught up with challenging legal goals set by Congress.

Schools have been neglecting or ignoring the legislative and court mandates, such as Public Law 94-142 (1975) and IDEA (1990), which have imposed on schools a requirement of offering a least restrictive environment for all special education students. They ignore the mandates that students with disabilities may be removed from the general education environment only to the extent necessary to provide special education services (Osborne & Dimattia, 1994). Schools are discounting the mandate established in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990, that:

[E]ach state must establish procedures to assure that, to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special education, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (20 U.S.C. 1412(5)[B])

The “least restrictive environment” phrase used in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) describes “our obligation as educators to place children with special needs in regular classroom settings whenever appropriate for their

educational growth. However, if a child's needs can be better served in a pull-out program, then educators have the legal responsibility to place the child elsewhere" (Smelter, 1994, p. 35). Recognizing that each student offers vastly different needs, so should the parameters of each disabled student's placement. The term least restrictive environment must be interpreted in the context for each student, thereby creating a challenge to educators to meet the challenge needed to serve all disabled students. The diversity that these students bring requires the schools to develop a different outcome for obtaining the least restrictive environment for each of the growing number of students. Schools are recognizing diversification of students, but unfortunately have not actively been implementing equally diverse pedagogical choices. Therefore, the schools are too frequently servicing these students in the same traditional ways. "Special and general education teachers have historically participated in a system that divides and separates teachers in the same way that it isolates and categorizes students" (Wood, 1998, p. 181).

In the past few years, court decisions regarding least restrictive environment have become numerous. "Some of these decisions allowed placements in segregated settings; however, the legal principles that emerged from these cases established the foundation for later courts to order inclusive placements" (Osborne & Dimattia, 1994, p. 8). Whatever placement is considered for a disabled student it should be least restrictive, allowing the maximum integration of students with other non-disabled peers. (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987) The outcome of the placement decision will be different from situation to situation, requiring teachers to be flexible in their instructional decisions. "Open-minded educators who take the 'least restrictive environment' mandate seriously may find



themselves ‘inclusionists’ one day and ‘exclusionists’ the next. That is the moral and legal reality of serving children with special needs” (Smelter, 1994, p. 36).

### Inclusive Education Model

Dover (1994) creatively describes, in the introduction to her study, the development of an inclusive school as an educational house celebrating diversity: “Picture your structure as having an interesting roofline, lots of rooms, plenty of space for additions, and a frame strong enough for almost constant remodeling” (p. iv). Dover (1994) recognizes that each school will reflect a different type of inclusive school model because of the very diversity we have discussed. “A wide range of available options, a diversity of student needs, and the particular talents and interests of staff combine to form unique patterns within individual schools and districts. It is difficult to set a standard for inclusion” (p. i). Nonetheless, true inclusion begins with the decision to educate as many students within their neighborhood schools and in the regular classroom while, at the same time, providing appropriate special education services to meet the individual needs of the child (Dover, 1994; Lipsky & Gartner, 1997).

Each student, regardless of need, is placed in a regular classroom, and then a program of appropriate accommodations and supports is structured to

- (1) allow the student maximum participation in the regular classroom as appropriate;
- (2) provide aids and services along with regular instruction;
- (3) ensure that the student’s individual educational needs are being addressed. (Dover, 1994, p. i)

Each stage along the continuum of placement services has a place in an inclusive educational model. It becomes the child's needs that dictate the type or types of models utilized in her education. Inclusion encourages schools to "build programs around individual student's needs rather than try to fit students into existing programs" (p. ii). Unfortunately, there are no clear parameters to uniformly place each child. The path for each special education student is more like a zigzag line calling for constant modes of change. But traveling down the staggered path offers the educator a continuing challenge that will be felt by a growing number of students.

Modifying is an ongoing process that is itself constantly changing. Needs change, types of modifications change, the structure of the support changes, and then the process begins again. (Dover, 1994, p. iii)

Concerns from administrators and teachers come with the inclusion of special education students. Since each school situation is so different, there is no way to neatly provide guidelines on how to accomplish the best inclusive school for all.

The IDEA law of 1990 does state that, through supplementary aids and services, the following are to be provided along with regular education instruction: special instruction, curricular adaptations, and instructional support services, materials, or equipment. What's clear is what is to be done. What's not clear is how it is to be done. (Dover, 1994, p. iii)

Equality should not be the sole directive for placement decisions if this equality might actually hurt the disabled students by placing them in uniform classes which do not respect or honor the diversity represented. The issue is not to serve each child the same,

but to accept alternative service and placement options that best serve each child in a unique and specialized way.

We find it entirely obvious that one child with special needs may learn better in the regular classroom, while another may learn better in a resource room or in a self-contained program. Children learn differently. Some perform better in the regular education classroom because they feel ostracized or self-conscious when asked to “go down the hallway” to visit the special education teacher. Their learning may suffer as a result, and so they are perfect candidates for inclusion. Other children have different needs; they may be so distracted by their peers in the regular classroom that they do not learn well, and so they are perfect candidates for a pull-out program. (Smelter, 1994, p. 36)

Acceptance of these alternatives require change in an educator’s perceptions, knowledge, and activities, which can be explained through Granovetter’s (1973, 1983) network analysis.

#### Network Analysis

Though legal mandates have outlined the need and the requirements of offering an education to all special education students in the least restrictive environment, many schools continue to support pull-out, segregated placements as the only placement option for their learning disabled students. “What the field of special education needs is not a narrow view of services for students with disabilities, but rather a commitment to the thoughtful use of the complete array of educational opportunities” (Holloway, 2001,

p. 88). To reach this lofty goal of an individual placement decision for each student calls for change within our schools and within each classroom, a change that will require “special and general educators to seek more interactive relationships, coordinated teaching arrangements, new skills and role definitions, and flexibility in organization” (Wood, 1998, p. 181).

According to Holloway (2001), a shared commitment by regular and special education teachers is essential to “ensure that all students receive a variety of learning opportunities in all education settings” (p. 88). The degree and success of educational change is related to the extent that teachers interact with their peers. “Change is a process that requires teachers to reach new understandings about their work, its purpose, how to accomplish it, and how their work connects with others” (Wood, 1998, p. 183). The many years of court litigation and legal mandates regarding special education have brought areas of needed change to the surface. In some classrooms these changes are implemented and successful for the benefit of students, and in other cases, the status quo rules the instructional decisions by teachers in spite of the students.

Granovetter’s (1973, 1976, 1983, 1995) network analysis, explains this anomaly by providing a useful way of examining the strength of the tie development, or relational interactions, among the members of a school culture. He maintains that such relationships, or ties are measurable and are labeled as either strong or weak:

the strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie. Each of these is somewhat

dependent of the other though the set is obviously highly intracorrelated.

(Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361)

Strong tie relationships in a school setting uphold and maintain the dominant culture and beliefs while the development of weak ties support bridges between the dominant culture and culturally different beliefs (Granovetter, 1973). Individuals with similar experiences would more readily establish strong ties with members of the group and members with dissimilar experiences would more likely develop weak ties with members of the group. The weak ties bridge a safety passage for the diffusion of new ideas where the strong ties sever the passage of innovation and create an island of isolation where traditional ideas and practices are perpetuated.

The weak and strong ties of a school culture create a network of social influence. The study of social influence “links the structure of social relations to attitudes and behaviors of the actors who compose a network” (Wasserman & Galaskiewicz, 1994, p. 3). Network analysis is a method used to study these ties, or relationships, within a group. “Structural analysis refers not only to relations among individuals but also, and very crucially, to the structure of those relations” (Granovetter, 1986, p. 82). This notion of relational networks linking social ties has become important as social scientists have “struggled to make sense of empirical data and grappled with theoretical issues” (Wasserman & Galaskiewicz, 1994, p. 11). Sociometry is one measurement used to measure these networks.

Moreno was the founder of sociometry, a measurement of a small group’s interpersonal relationships (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). In 1941, Moreno offered his first definition of sociometry as in accordance to the word’s Latin etymology. Moreno put an

emphasis on the second half of the word, “metrum” meaning measure, instead of on the first half of the word, “socius” meaning companion. “In simplest terms, a sociometric measure is a means of assessing the attractions, or attractions and repulsions, within a given groups” (Lindzey & Byrne, 1968, p. 455).

Moreno’s (1934) sociogram, a precursor to Network Analysis, is a “means for depicting the interpersonal structure of groups” (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 11), evident through the sociometry measurement, and is a useful measurement tool for depicting the interpersonal relations in small groups. A sociogram is a picture developed from the sociometry measurement in which people are depicted as points, or nodes, and interactions are depicted by lines linking these points (Lindzey & Byrne, 1968). “These instruments are designed specifically to provide a sensitive and objective picture of the interpersonal relations existing within a group and between pairs of individuals” (p. 452). A sociogram is developed in a two-dimensional space where relationships among pairs of people are represented by points linked together by lines. These lines depict the communication network occurring in a social situation and give insights to the group’s structures and properties and each individual’s position within these networks (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). “Very important findings of tendencies toward reciprocity or mutuality of positive affect, structural balance, and transitivity, discovered early in network analysis, have had a profound impact on the study of social structure” (p. 13). As a single research procedure, the sociometric data is somewhat limited in its efficacy, but combined with other research methodology sociometric measures serve as a strong research tool to gain information regarding the social structures of groups.

Wasserman and Faust (1994) list and define the following key concepts, which are fundamental in the discussion of social networks: “actor, relational tie, dyad, triad, subgroup, group, relation, and network” (p. 17). An actor is defined as the social entities within the social network. “Actors are discrete individual, corporate, or collective social units” (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 17). “One-mode networks” refers to a group of actors that are of similar type. Though the word “actor” is used, it does not suggest that these entities have the capability to “act.” Actors are linked to one another by a range of social ties referred to as relational ties. A tie establishes “a linkage between a pair of actors” (p. 18). The basic linkage of ties is a relationship instituted between two actors referred to as a dyad. “A dyad consists of a pair of actors and the (possible) tie(s) between them. Dyadic analyses focus on the properties of pairwise relationships, such as whether ties are reciprocated or not, or whether specific types of multiple relationships tend to occur together” (p. 18). A study consisting of larger groups of actors may study triads. A triad is “a subset of three actors and the (possible) tie(s) among them” (p. 18).

A group is “the collection of all actors on which ties are to be measured” (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 19). The capacity of network analysis is to model the relationships within the group. A social network can contain many groups of actors, but only one “actor set” if it is a one-mode network. A subgroup is “any subset of actors, and all ties among them” (p. 19). A relation is “the collection of ties of a specific kind among members of a group” (p. 20). The relation refers to the “collection of ties” from a pair of actors from a given actor set. A social network consists of a “finite set or sets of actors and the relation or relations defined on them” (p. 20).

Thomas Bender (1978) states “[T]he network approach deliberately seeks to examine the way in which people may relate to one another in terms of several different normative frameworks at one and the same time and how a person’s behavior might in part be understood in light of the pattern of coincidence of these frameworks” (p. 122). The network approach has great value by forcing the researcher to be sensitive to the social ties available in a network without restricting the interpretation of what is found (Bender, 1978).

The relationships between groups can be identified and studied through the use of network analysis, specifically, utilizing the sociometric technique. The relationships are signified by the absence or presence of ties, which may be clearly measured utilizing Granovetter’s (1973) characteristics of time, emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocity.

The more emotional energy a number of individuals spend within their own group, the less appears to be available to be spent outside of it, the less attention is paid by them to other groups of individuals in the community, the less attention is paid to them in return, and the less becomes their popularity. (Moreno, 1934, p. 425)

Great emotional energy has been spent behind the doors of many teachers, resulting in many unnecessary isolated placement choices for learning disabled students. The least restrictive environment mandate calls for educators to promote the development of innovative placement options to meet the increased special education student population. Unfortunately, this call requires teachers to step out of their comfort zone and create



relationships that will generate the dissemination of new ideas for the optimal education for all students.

Many years ago, John F. Kennedy profoundly stated that:

Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope; and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppressions and resistance. (1986, p. 7)

Granovetter's (1973 & 1983) Network Analysis explains the barriers and the "currents" creating successful avenues to change. The development of ties in a school can serve as the bridge to promote the crossing of each other's ideas and beliefs. Weak ties can allow a constant evolution of a school's culture where strong ties will promote the status quo and stagnation of the school's vision and academic implementation of innovative instruction and placement strategies for all students.

### Summary

History continues to tell the story of educational exclusion of special education students in classrooms across our nation. The movement towards the optimal inclusive environment for each student has been supported through Federal law and court litigation. To develop a successful continuum of student placement options, changes in the perceptions, knowledge, and actions of teachers must be obtained. The purpose of this study is to use Network Analysis (Granovetter, 1973, 1983) to examine teachers' strong and weak ties and the impact of these social networks upon the knowledge of and

willingness to accept and implement changes needed to obtain the optimal least restrictive environment for students with learning disabilities. In time, perhaps our entire educational process will consider each layer of the placement continuum to obtain the most advantageous classroom structure for each special education student according to the unique and diverse needs of each learner.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

Through the lens of Network Analysis (Granovetter, 1973, 1976, 1983), this study examined teachers' ties and the impact of these social networks upon the relationships, perceptions, knowledge, and actions needed to obtain the optimal least restrictive environment for students with learning disabilities. The non-discretionary congressional mandates, outlining the expectations of student placement, have actively been enforced by the courts, but the implementation of these mandates is not evident through classroom practices.

#### Qualitative Inquiry

As the researcher, I sought to discover and understand the perspectives of this study's respondents through qualitative methodology. "The basic qualitative study in education typically draws from concepts, models, and theories in education psychology, developmental psychology, cognitive psychology, and sociology. Data are collected through interviews, observations, or document analysis" (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). The strength of qualitative inquiry is gained through the use of human subjects as the resource of data collection. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that the naturalist elects to use him- or herself as well as other humans as the primary data-gathering instruments (as opposed to paper-and-pencil or brass

instruments) because it would be virtually impossible to devise *a priori* a nonhuman instrument with sufficient adaptability to encompass and adjust to the variety of realities that will be encountered; because of the understanding that all instruments interact with respondents and objects but that only the human instrument is capable of grasping and evaluating the meaning of that differential interaction; because the intrusion of instruments intervenes in the mutual shaping of other elements and that shaping can be appreciated and evaluated only by a human; and because all instruments are value-based and interact with local values but only the human is in position to identify and take into account those resulting biases. (pp. 39-40)

The respondents' perspectives in this study were obtained through focus groups and individual interview sessions. Some of the data obtained through these interview sessions was then converted into visual images, sociograms, representing the teachers' strong and weak tie networks. The network studied included 19 teachers, a school counselor, school administrator, and other outside people identified by the respondents as influential in the development of their knowledge, perceptions, and actions regarding special education.

### Respondents

Creswell (1994) states that “[T]he idea of qualitative research is to purposefully select informants that will best answer the research question” (p. 149). Parameters of respondent selection were defined “purposefully,” by grouping teachers according to their

current special education placement options their classrooms represent and support including pull-out and inclusion placement options.

As part of a brief individual interview session, each respondent was asked to offer demographic information. Table 1 presents the respondents' demographic data summary regarding highest degrees earned, their total number of years in education, the number of years of service at Riley Elementary, and a description of each respondent's current work position.

Of the teachers at Riley Elementary School, nine were chosen to participate in the focus group interviews based on the current special education student placement choices implemented in their classrooms. Evidence of the teacher respondents' special education placement options and accommodations was obtained through observations.

Respondents C, D, E, F, and G are actively engaged in inclusion placement practices for their learning disabled students and Respondents H, I, J, and K adhered to pull-out placement for their learning disabled students.

Respondent A is the principal, Respondent B is the school counselor, and Respondent L is the district's special education administrator. Of the teacher respondents, there was one respondent from each grade level from grades third to fifth on each of the two focus groups. Respondents C and K represent learning disabled teachers,

Table 1

Demographic Data Concerning Educational Level and Teaching Experience

Members	Highest Degree	# years teaching	# years at Riley Elementary	Current work position
Administration				
A	M.A.	11	6	principal
B	M.A.	36	10	counselor
Inclusion Teachers				
C	B.A.	9	2	L.D. teacher
D	B.A.	11	3	Kindergarten
E	B.A.	5	2	5th grade
F	B.A.	19	2	3rd grade
G	M.A.+60	12	2	4th grade
Pull-out Teachers				
H	M.A.+60	28	3	5th grade
I	B.A.	3	3	4th grade
J	B.S.	4	2	3rd grade
K	M.A.	11	4	L.D. teacher
District Administrator				
L	Ed.D	7	0	special education

Respondent D is a kindergarten teacher, Respondents F and J are third grade teachers, Respondents G and I are fourth grade teachers, and Respondents E and H are fifth grade teachers. The inclusion focus group had one extra respondent, the kindergarten teacher, Respondent D.

Of the nine participating teachers, the average number of teaching years at Riley Elementary is 2.77 years and the average number of total teaching years experience is 11

years. Respondent A, the school principal has 11 years of teaching and 10 years of administrative experience in two different state public elementary schools. Respondent B, the counselor, has 36 years in education, including eight years as a principal, 21 years as a counselor, and seven years as a classroom teacher and coach, all at Riley and one other local high school. Respondent L, the district's special education coordinator has taught special education for seven years and has served for 12 years. This respondent is the only person who did not work at the Riley Elementary School site at time of the study.

Examination of the number of total years in the teaching field ranged from Respondent B's 36 years to Respondent I's three years. Respondents ranged from 10 years to two years of experience at Riley Elementary with respondent B serving the longest with 10 years and respondents C, E, F, G, and J each serving the least with two years experience. A 26% teacher turn-over rate occurred from the academic year 2000-2001 to academic year 2001-2002. Respondents A, B, and L hold at least a masters degree in elementary education, counseling and/or educational administration. Respondents C, D, E, F, I, and J hold a bachelor's degree from various universities. Respondents G and H each hold their master's degree +60 hours and Respondent K holds her master's degree in elementary education.

#### Site

The study's site, Riley Elementary, is one of 56 elementary schools within a midwestern public school system in the northeastern section of a Midwestern state. Midwestern Public Schools serves 23,624 elementary aged students in an area of 172.78 square miles. Riley Elementary is a public urban elementary schools serving students

from kindergarten through fifth grades. Total enrollment of Riley Elementary School for 2001-2002 is currently 282 students. Over the past four years, Native American and African American student populations have increased. The school site has 51 percent Caucasian population. The percentage of low-income students is 81 percent and this school site has been eligible for Title I funds since August 1994. The student mobility rate at this site has been a staggering 75 to 80 percent over the last four years.

Students in Riley Elementary are residents of an urban community with a median population age of 28.5 with 70 percent of the population under 45 years of age. Fifty percent of the students live in single-parent households or foster care and over 50 percent of the student population lives in low-income housing (Riley Elementary School web site). Educators at the Riley Elementary School site consist of a principal, a counselor, and 19 teachers including 13 regular education teachers serving kindergarten to fifth grade students, 2.5 teachers serving the learning disabled students, one teacher for the emotionally disturbed, one teacher for the mentally retarded, and two teachers for the gifted and talented.

### Data Collection

For this study, data collected represented various perspectives regarding the relationship, perceptions, knowledge, and actions used to place and serve students with learning disabilities in the mandated least restrictive environment. Lincoln and Guba (1985) tell us that the naturalist should conduct their research in the natural setting of the study because:



realities are wholes that cannot be understood in isolation from their contexts, nor can they be fragmented for separate study of the parts; because of the belief that the very act of observation influences what is seen, and so the research interaction should take place with the entity-in-context for fullest understanding; because of the belief that context is crucial in deciding whether or not a finding may have meaning in some other context as well; because of the belief in complex mutual shaping rather than linear causation, which suggests that the phenomenon must be studied in its full-scale influence (force) field; and because contextual value structures are at least partly determinative of what will be found.

(p. 39)

All interviews were conducted at the school site, thus offering a familiar environment for the respondents. Before beginning the data collection, an informed consent form (Appendix B) was individually explained to the respondents and then properly executed before each interview session. Respondents were informed that all data would be held confidential and encoded to protect this confidentiality status. For confidentiality purposes, references to individual names of respondents were replaced with letters A-L and other people identified by the respondents were referenced with numbers. The name of the school district and the individual elementary school used as the study site were identified with pseudonyms. The use of coded letters, numbers, and pseudonyms aided in the preservation of the information without revealing the identities of respondents.

Interviews were tape recorded to preserve data and ensure accuracy. Additional measures were taken to protect the identities of the respondents. The recorded cassette tapes were labeled as “pull-out focus group” and “inclusion focus group” and the participants’ coded letters were attached to each tape label. Individual interviews were also coded by letter name and the key of the labels and pseudonyms were stored in a separate place from the interview tapes and transcriptions. Every effort was made to protect confidentiality.

During this discussion of informed consent, it was emphasized that participation in the study was voluntary and that participants could withdraw from the study at any time. It was also explained that the study was designed to discuss current special education placement options and curriculum modifications, not to provide judgments about the chosen special education placement choice or use of accommodations in theirs or others classrooms. Probing questions were used to generate discussion amongst the members of the focus groups and to promote descriptive data from their perspectives. “Probes encourage the interviewee to expand on the matter at hand, complete an example or narrative, or explain a statement that the interviewer did not understand” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 208).

### Focus Group Interviews

“Mini-focus groups of four to five participants” as suggested by Greenbaum (1998, p. 15) were conducted at Riley Elementary at the onset of this study. According to Greenbaum (1998), a major strength of focus groups is that “a company knows more about its own product or service than almost any outsider and can therefore discuss it

more knowledgeably with participants in focus groups or one-on-one than an outside researcher can” (p. 29). In this study, the homogeneous groups of teachers were able to openly and knowledgeably discuss their personal perspectives and instructional decisions regarding special education placement options and services currently implemented in the classrooms at the Riley Elementary School. Focus group interviews allowed me to “call together several people to talk about a concern held by the researcher or clients of the researcher” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 139). At Riley Elementary, the call for concern, prompted by this study, was the lack of change supporting various placement options promoting the optimal least restrictive environment for the learning disabled student population.

Greenbaum (1998) recommends to “[C]hoose the people who best meet the recruitment criteria. Those who do so marginally should be eliminated first” (p. 46). Through observation of classroom practices, it was found that ten teachers at Riley Elementary are currently not serving learning disabled students nor do they seem to hold a clear philosophy regarding placement options and service accommodations for learning disabled students, so they were eliminated from the selection process first. Those that shared a specific philosophy regarding special education placement for learning disabled students, such as pull-out or inclusion, were prioritized as respondents for the two focus groups. Respondents C, D, E, F, and G participated in the inclusion focus group (12/4/01) and Respondents H, I, J, and K participated in the pull-out focus group (12/5/01).

## Individual Interviews

Included in these interviews were the school principal and school counselor who were interviewed in their offices after school. The Midwestern Public Schools District Special Education Coordinator also participated in the individual interview process via e-mail. This interview was conducted over a two-week period (2/12/02-2/26/02). The nine teacher respondents, chosen for the focus group interviews, participated in individual interview sessions as well.

I used the individual interview data collection tool to obtain preliminary demographics and follow-up information after the focus group interview transcriptions had been thematically coded. The individual interviews gave the nine focus group respondents an opportunity to clarify unanswered or ambiguous information obtained through the focus group sessions. The combination of focus group and individual interviews provided a fuller understanding of each perspective regarding their relationships, perceptions, knowledge, and actions influencing the decisions of student placement for learning disabled students. “In these combined uses of qualitative methods, the goal is to use each method so that it contributes something unique to the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Morgan, 1997, p. 3).

A copy of the coded, interview transcript, from the focus group in which the teacher participated, was given to each respondent prior to his or her individual interview session. Emerging themes were marked on the transcripts prior to distribution, to promote member checking of the collected data and the initial analysis. Respondents A, B, C, D, H, K, and J were willing to read the whole transcript. Respondents E, F, I, and G

said they did not have time to read it, but trusted me, as researcher, to accurately convey what they said. I allowed time for member checking to promote added strength and meaning to the data. Respondents that did read their transcripts agreed with the information and found the emerging themes “intriguing” (Respondent C, 2/14/02).

During the individual interview sessions, the respondents were allowed an opportunity to list the people they believed gave them the most information regarding instructional ideas and special education placement options and services for learning disabled students. This information was then used to formulate the first sociogram representing the relational network of a shared philosophy (see Figure 1, Appendix E). The second sociogram depicts the relationships between the people whom the respondents identified as gaining instructional knowledge (see Figure 2, Appendix E). Further information was obtained describing the type of relationship each person had with the other. This network of relationships was depicted in the third sociogram (see Figure 3, Appendix E).

An interview protocol (see Appendix C) with general topical questions was customized for the focus group and more specific interview protocol (see Appendix D) evolved for the individual interview sessions. The focus group protocol included general statements to encourage and respect open discussion topics that might arise during each session. The interview protocol for the individual interviews involved more specific questions about demographics and follow-up information. (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) Questions for each type of interview session were formulated to gain general as well as specific information.

## Summary

Relationship, knowledge, perceptions, and actions were themes which emerged through the data as qualities needed to obtain the optimal least restrictive environment for students with learning disabilities. In Chapter IV, these themes will be discussed in isolation, but they are interrelated, building on each other to ultimately provide actions by teachers in their classrooms.

## CHAPTER IV

### DATA PRESENTATION

Based upon the data collected, I was able to formulate a rich, thick description under each of the topics covered, showing qualities under each of the emerging themes. “Qualitative interviewers don’t try to simplify, but instead try to capture some of the richness and complexity of their subject matter and explain it in a comprehensible way” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 76). A detailed description of the data will help convey the full meaning from each perspective identified. “Depth means getting a thoughtful answer based on considerable evidence as well as getting full consideration of a topic from diverse points of view” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 76). The main topics emerging through the data include: relationships, knowledge, perceptions, and actions. Data supporting each topic is reported below.

#### Relationships

Respondents included in the study identified benefits resulting from the relationships between the teachers and administration at Riley Elementary. The data collected revealed sharing, compromise, trust, and teacher and administrative support as common and important qualities of the respondents’ relationships.

## Sharing

One characteristic of a positive relationship, as the data revealed, is sharing, including shared knowledge, shared materials, and shared uniqueness of perceptions. Respondent H, a fifth grade pull-out teacher, expressed the importance of teachers sharing diverse knowledge, promoting diversity in pedagogy for the benefit of students:

We need to work as a team. It should be a joint thing of the teachers that currently have them, the special teachers, and the teachers that are going to have them. If we don't involve everyone and learn from each other, we will risk missing something, unfortunately to the detriment of a student.

(12-5-01)

The importance of sharing materials and ideas was common. Respondent H described this sharing from the perspective of the pull-out focus group:

I've talked with people in other schools that didn't want to share ideas and didn't want to share their materials, but you know, I don't know of anybody like that here (Riley Elementary). I'm not afraid to ask anybody for anything, and I hope no one's afraid to ask me for anything to borrow or share ideas. (12-5-01)

Other members of the pull-out focus group described the sharing of teachers' differences as beneficial for students. Respondent J, a third grade teacher, described her experiences from her past team-teaching situation:

There is something unique and different about each of us. I mean, I can look at her and she (#1) would sit there and draw something. I mean, I feel



like I can draw okay, but she can just sit there and do things that I admire so much, I admire our different qualities. I can tell people that I have learned from her and that there are things that I take from her everywhere I go. (12-5-01)

Respondent H further described the strength of differences: “If we were all alike in everything, it would be like being married to someone who’s just like you, and that just wouldn’t work” (12-5-01).

Respondent F, third grade inclusion teacher, added the strong view that she found it almost impossible to successfully service special education students without sharing ideas through our natural differences. She offered this view:

It is so nice to be able to really bounce ideas off each other and share the various problems you experience with one another. It really helps me to work closely with Respondent K because she sees things so differently from me and I see things that she might not see, so we really work well together. This has been tremendously beneficial for some of our students, because I can just see some with just huge gains since the beginning of the year. It’s just kind of incredible to see some of them. To think, you know, at the beginning of the year they couldn’t have phonetically spelled anything, and now they’re getting so close on words, Wow, I mean, it’s just really amazing. I think it has been successful, in my eyes, because we talk specifically about what we are both going to be responsible for and it’s really working because we work on our strengths. Respondent K shared with me about a new phonics program, it’s a program that I would

have never come into contact with if it had not been from her. We have adapted this to our classroom and have seen considerable gains with our at-risk students. It's one of those workshops I would have never attended, because it just isn't my thing, but I learned from her and the kids have done great with the program. I have now shared this program with many of my other teacher friends in other buildings, which is neat to watch them learn from something we are doing. (12-4-01)

Another pull-out teacher, Respondent J, third grade, expressed the idea that we naturally share ideas with closest colleagues:

The closest we get to spending time with larger groups is when we have our little door parties and we talk about this or that. We see new ideas, share what we are doing in our classes, and adapt it to our classes, in a way we think it will work for our kids. (12-5-01)

Inclusion teachers, Respondents C, a teacher of learning disabled, and G, a fourth grade teacher, agreed with Respondent J, third grade pull-out teacher, that sharing was a relationship characteristic. That sharing was a beneficial characteristic in their inclusion classroom relationship because they naturally learn from respective differences in teaching philosophies, they share these differences to promote a variety of opportunities for the benefit of the students in their classroom. Respondent G further explained:

We have to communicate or it wouldn't be near as successful. It is like we learn to feel when one of us is coming and one of us is going. We have certain kids that respond to Respondent C (inclusion LD teacher) much better than to me, and vice versa. We are very different people, which

optimizes the benefits of the sharing. We both have much to offer the kids, but in different areas. I tend to be the project oriented person and Respondent C keeps me in line so we don't miss the basics we need to get across. We have a real respect for one another, which has been a good learning experience for the kids in itself. It helps that we share the same vision for our students, to offer the least restrictive environment for them. We just want to offer a learning environment or a place for each child to flourish with the tools that we can give them. It's like they have the capacity to achieve this if we can only offer the best place with the right accommodations. I think that with the kind of tools we offer our students should be able to function in the best and most comfortable classroom. But, you know, we often feel bad because we think that maybe the structure of how we teach is actually mandating the placement of our kids and that seems a bit backwards. (12-5-01)

Respondent K, a pull-out teacher of learning disabled students, pointed out that the teachers share a personal respect towards each other on days when "you've got other things on your mind, maybe your own children or something or maybe your car wouldn't start twice today, and you had to get it jumped twice today" (12-5-01). This type of sharing was favorably supported by all respondents as they felt that the closeness of the school's teachers led to a successful mutual professional and personal benefit between the individuals of the relationships.

## Compromise

Compromise is a quality of mutuality that becomes evident in successful and developing relationships towards the resolution of disagreements or conflicts. Thus, as Respondent F, a third grade teacher from the inclusion focus group, describes compromise, it is a way to gain benefit from everyone's strengths:

I think we all have strengths in areas that we build off of. We have to be able to look and take what will work for us and be willing to block what will not work for our kids. I can say that I have learned that you have to be willing to seek new ideas and be willing to request help from others, especially from the special education teachers. You have to be willing to admit you have no idea how to service these students and then be willing to accept and try the new ideas given to you. I figure these teachers have had a lot more time with trial and error and have worked through to find something that works. Of course, we kind of have a trial and error time with each student, which makes things a bit tough. We are really lucky to have our special education teachers, especially since they are so willing to help and serve as an excellent resource, especially in reading. (12-4-01)

Respondent J, a third grade pull-out teacher, viewed compromise as a relational element of respecting each other's ideas, with the ability to implement their ideas side-by-side in different ways:

You can have different ideas and there's always compromise. I mean, #1 (other Riley first grade teacher) and I, we had some ideas about things but

not everything, and we did compromise. You know, and we would do things her way and we would do things my way. We had to adjust, you know, and we would try different things. You know, okay, let's try it this way and then we'll try it your way. It wasn't always, really, necessarily agreeing, but it worked very well, because you just have that much more input and more ideas. You are always going to have different abilities than those around you. Okay, I am good at this and you are good at that, we are just different. We just have to recognize that we are creative in different ways and respect the differences. I just cannot imagine having two people with the same philosophies or two people with the same anything, really, because everybody's coming from a different direction. You might have similar ideas, but you're not going to mesh on everything. (12-5-01)

Third grade pull-out teacher, Respondent F, shared a story about a teacher who was perceived negatively because of his different pedagogical choices. However, the differences he brought to this school gradually promoted a compromised acceptance of his teaching philosophy and created change throughout the whole school:

I knew this one teacher, he was very successful in the classroom, but was questioned for his politically correct philosophy. He was very, very laid back, an extraordinary teacher. He viewed traditional teaching as a way of putting kids in a black hole, where all the learning those teachers (traditional teachers) had done was kind of sucked from their brains. He wasn't accepted at first, but now the school has gone more to adopt his

philosophy, well, half and half. It was certainly a compromise on both sides, a compromise that took time for acceptance. (12-4-01).

Compromise brings respect and promotes the acceptance of new knowledge, perceptions, and actions by those in a relationship.

### Trust

Respondents also identified trust as an important quality in relationships. Respondents viewed trust as promoting change in the classroom and ultimately benefitting students. An inclusion teacher of learning disabled students, Respondent C, describes the trust that developed between her and Respondent G, a fourth grade inclusion teacher, as a change which ultimately reaches the classroom:

We have come to understand that not everything is going to work for everyone. I mean, I think we all still remember it is our classroom and we have to be comfortable with the goings on there. You don't have to rock the boat to make it work for kids. It is much easier accepting the changes, especially in our situation, because we (Respondents C and G) were friends before we were team teachers. We already had a bond and an acceptance that we were different and that we didn't need to see everything eye-to-eye. It is certainly a respect issue. (12/4/01)

Respondent G said that her inclusion class taught with Respondent C was so successful because mutual trust and respect was the cornerstone of their relationship:

Let me tell you, we are constantly questioning each other to keep us on our toes. We share a lot, but it's because we are opposites. We work together

very smoothly, but I am telling you that we are opposites. I do think that the one thing we share is that we both are constantly searching for the magic thing that's going to finally click and help them to see and learn. It's like driving down a tunnel and you go one way and it doesn't work, so you have to back out and try again. I think we share in this role, but we just may be driving the car a little different way, but with the same direction in mind. (12-4-01)

Respondent H, a fifth grade pull-out teacher, expressed the benefit that trust with students and teachers is a relational element that is essential to attain change in the classroom:

What is good is that we all have our own problems, but we see what other teachers are doing, how they treat their students, what is working, and we learn from them because no two classes are alike. I find myself adapting all the time, every year, all year. (12-5-01)

Third grade inclusion teacher, Respondent F, added that a developed trust with another teacher makes the acceptance of change much more comfortable and easier to accept:

Sometimes I have to be careful that I don't feel that people are judging me when they offer their new ideas. If I see a teacher as really innovative, I might feel like they have it altogether and this might cause friction with me. In this case, I might see the transfer of ideas as more friction because teaching is such a personal thing where someone is rooted in very deep beliefs, which may cause offense to be taken. (12-4-01)

Respondent H then added that the trust between teachers directly benefits her students and saves her time:

I have had pretty much the same kids this year, but it's still different. And there are other personalities in the class this year that makes the environment completely different. But still, talking to the teachers who have had these students in the past may help me discover something more quickly, something that otherwise would have taken me half the year or more to discover, which could have helped my students much quicker. I have to admit, I don't pull my students' permanent records and read them all. I know they (the past teachers) are going to know the students and will be able to tell me about them, and I would feel comfortable with this information because of the source. (12-5-01)

The school principal in this study supports academic freedom for her teachers, trusting them to make optimal instructional decisions for students. She connects academic freedom to instructional decisions that will translate into successful changes in the classroom:

I leave the decision of placement options to the teachers. Like inclusion and pull-out, I tried to push inclusion on Respondent K (pull-out teacher of learning disabled students) and they are now back to where they were last year, but I didn't do anything because I think it is important to leave it to teacher's choice. I have found that what a teacher likes to do will be done well, and what they don't like to do, they'll sabotage, and they'll do it the way they want to anyway, so what is the point. Of course, we have to be



Careful with special education students because the teachers have to service them, that is not a choice, but how they do it is up to them. I just trust that they take the students' needs and interests into account when making their decisions, and I think they do. (1-8-02)

### Teacher and Administrative Support

Personal and professional relationships helped to insure essential support for the teachers. The interviewees in the "pull-out" focus group agreed that support in the classroom was specifically important and helpful when a teacher was experiencing challenges from the poor behavior of her special education students. Respondent J, a third grade pull-out teacher, explained:

I think it's good that we do stick together, like today, I had this special education child that I was at my wit's end. I went out in the hall and I'm like saying, "Okay, get your stuff!" I had no idea where this child was going, but he was going out. And you know, I see the first door and there's Respondent F (third grade inclusion teacher). I asked her if someone could come sit in her room. Respondent F said "[S]ure, of course he can." You know, he was there for quite some time. I don't even know if he worked, I just knew he was quiet. I have to admit it, I just couldn't tolerate him (the student) anymore, and I mean, I'll keep anyone else's students any day, I had four students yesterday. I just had to get this child out of my room, and Respondent F (third grade inclusion teacher) knows that I will keep her students for her anytime. (12-5-01)

Respondent K, a pull-out teacher of learning disabled students, recognizes the differences between teachers at Riley and acknowledges support does not always mean acceptance of every practice by every teacher, but even with the differences, emotional and professional support are evident elements in the relationships at Riley Elementary:

I think all of us love each other and are supportive of each other. We've all got our strengths, we've all got our weaknesses, we all make our mistakes, and you know, there's no bickering that I know of in the faculty. There are no groups or cliques. We all get frustrated once in awhile and vent our frustrations. I get frustrated with #23 (special education teacher) and could just wring his neck, but I love him to death, and I'd do anything to help him. And I think everybody does the best that they can. I certainly do not support what he does, especially the time I witnessed him telling \_\_\_\_\_ (a student) to read her book. He's standing over her telling her to read and she's telling him she doesn't want to read. \_\_\_\_\_ tells #23 that "Every time I come down here, all you want me to do is read and I am sick of reading." #23 stays persistent, patient, and never loses his cool. He continues telling her she needs to open her book and read. Now, that would have driven me crazy, and I am certainly not going to say I learned anything from him at that moment, I just recognize that we are all so very different. (12-5-01)

Support from the school principal emerged as a very important and respected quality within the relationships at Riley Elementary. Respondents in both focus groups verbalized an appreciation for their school principal and her willingness to support the

teachers. Respondent F, a third grade inclusion teacher, voiced the view that a supportive principal is the most effective agent needed for true change in a school. She explained:

Having a supportive principal is crucial. I mean, one who allows you to make the decisions and is not oppressive. That is just one of the most important things to getting things done in a school, because if you are in fear or you don't respect your administrator, nothing is going to get better. And if there's change, it will be for the worse if your principal isn't behind you because people can't function and do their best in that type of situation. And I think a principal who encourages you to get out there, and to learn things, and to know to put forth the best practices, that's the kind of change agent a school needs. Your principal needs to encourage you to push yourself and to offer you time to be reflective about your practices. This is certainly how respondent A has treated me since I have taught here. (12-4-01)

When specifically asked about learning disabled student placement options and curriculum modifications, the principal, Respondent A, said:

I leave that up to the teacher too. Sometimes the teacher wants the special education teacher to provide everything they need for every subject area. And then, we have other teachers that they want to do it themselves, because they want to include the children in the whole classroom process. So, again, it depends upon what the teacher wants to do. (1-8-02)

Support within relationships involves sharing, compromise, encouragement, and trust. Professional support given to the teachers from the principal was respected and appreciated.

### Knowledge

The attainment of special education knowledge, including legal mandates, student placement options, and classroom service accommodations directly impacts learning disabled students. An adoption and utilization of this new knowledge promotes changes needed to assure the optimal least restrictive environment for students with learning disabilities. Transference of this new knowledge to other teachers then diffuses changes, which ultimately benefits the educational process of more learning disabled students. Emerging themes under knowledge include sources of knowledge, opportunity for knowledge development, and knowledge as an agent of change.

#### Sources of Knowledge

During the interviews, respondents were asked to list people to whom they relied upon for new instructional information. Pull-out teacher Respondents H, K, I, and J listed Riley Elementary teachers as main source of new instructional information. On the other hand, inclusion teacher Respondents C, D, E, F, and G listed people within Riley Elementary as well as external sources such as university contacts, their children's teachers, and significant others including district reading coordinators, workshop teachers, and teachers from other schools. Respondents A and B, the principal and

counselor, gained information from other principals and counselors, district officials, lawyers, as well as some teachers from Riley Elementary.

Respondent C, an inclusion teacher of the learning disabled, identified Respondent K, a pull-out teacher of the learning disabled, as an information source regarding new inclusion placement strategies:

We were friends first through our children, and developed a professional relationship two years ago. It seems a bit backwards, but we really do have a professional based relationship at school. We talk about teaching strategies and our students. This is how I have learned so much about inclusion. I certainly would have never learned this information if Respondent G (fourth grade inclusion teacher) and I would have never established a professional relationship. I don't think the topic would have ever come up. We are still friends, but we have just added the professional angle to our relationship. (2/13/02)

During the inclusion focus group interview, fifth grade Respondent E shared information about IDEA, explaining that this special education information would positively affect learning disabled students. When asked where she obtained this information, she said "Oh, probably from a college professor" (12-4-01).

During one pull-out focus group interview, fifth grade pull-out teacher, Respondent H, reflected on a relationship she had with another teacher at a school where she use to teach. The knowledge she gained from this relationship changed her ideas about inclusion:

I was at Rogers School teaching fourth and fifth grades, and we had one L.D. teacher that did third, fourth, and fifth. We didn't have a lot of L.D. students there like we do here (Riley Elementary). But, I had a really low class, as a matter of fact, I had four children in my class that came straight from the hospital to school. I had one child that was arrested for armed robbery that year with his oldest brother, a week after he got out of prison. This was just unbelievable! These four children were dysfunctional and didn't belong in that school. At that time, I was totally against inclusion, especially for these students. But then, I had the privilege of working with a wonderful teacher, one of those unique situations that changes your thoughts about teaching. I started finally believing that inclusion could really work well, but I think it was of this the special education teacher. She came into my room 45 minutes in the morning and the afternoon, and then would drop in periodically. Because I had those four children and 12 other L.D. students, I thought I would be totally against inclusion, but I actually loved it. It just worked really well because of the relationship I had with this teacher. She (the L.D. teacher) went to another school and we got another L.D. teacher who was just awful. She would come in, sit down, chew gum and drink Pepsi. I realized that the kids had not changed, the program had not changed, but that the chemistry between me and the L.D. teacher made all the difference in the world in how I taught my special education kids. I ended up with a bad taste in my mouth with this new L.D. teacher and I never wanted to do inclusion again. (12-5-01)

When asked when and where Respondent H had obtained her knowledge about special education, she replied:

It has been so long ago, I am not sure. I think it was probably in one of my college classes, but since I have taught 11 years, I have lost track. I went to a workshop recently, but it talked more about the legalities of it all.

You know, I think that is the focus, so that is what I take care of.

(12/5/01)

This lack of new knowledge has directly affected the current placement options and instructional strategies decisions for Respondent F's third grade inclusion, learning disabled students. She has total support of pull-out placement strategies, regardless of the student's needs. Respondent F is looked to as a main source of knowledge regarding special education, so this is the information she is conveying, which supports and perpetuates the status quo.

Inclusion Respondents C, D, G, and H have obtained new knowledge regarding special education which is evident by the implementation of new strategies and placement options for their learning disabled students. When asked where they had obtained their information Respondent G shares: From my recent graduate classes and some workshops I chose to go during our yearly teacher conference. I also learn ideas from Respondent C since we are together so much. I go to Respondent F all the time with questions because I can bank on the fact that she will know the answer. She has kept in touch with her university professors and participates in university study groups. She is always trying new teaching methods in her classroom that I steal from her. I guess I probably go to her

because she does have her National Board Certificate and I know she has learned so much through this process. (12/4/01)

When asked if Respondent K, pull-out teacher of learning disabled, ever asked Respondent F, third grade inclusion teacher, specific questions regarding special education, she said: “No, special education is not her area of expertise. I think this is the first year she has ever taught special education kids” (12/4/01).

Respondent I, a fourth grade pull-out teacher, said change is promoted in her classroom because of new knowledge she gains: “I’ve never taught the same any year I’ve taught; it’s always been different” (12-5-01). When asked what made Respondent I teach differently from year to year, she said: “Probably the fact my students are different every year and because I learn many new things from the different teachers I come in contact” (12-5-01).

Respondents from the pull-out focus group all stated that the learning disabled teacher, Respondent K, had a firm foundation and background in special education. Respondents from the inclusion focus group felt #4, the teacher of the mentally retarded, and #9, teacher of the emotionally disturbed, each held the knowledge-base they needed to successfully make decisions regarding the optimal least-restrictive placement option for their learning disabled students.

All nine respondents agreed that they did not get to work directly with the special education teachers, thus restricting the amount of knowledge they gained about this learning arena. Inclusion teacher of the learning disabled, Respondent C said “It is really unfortunate that we have all of this untapped knowledge at school which would help our



special education students, but we don't get the opportunity to tap into it. I guess it is the lack of time in any given day" (12-5-01).

The principal, Respondent A, said she gains information about legal mandates from the principal's meetings and current journal articles. The information she obtains from the district meetings is focused on ramifications of not following the legal mandates instead of contents and requirements of the mandates. Respondent A explains:

We have to stay informed or we will get sued. And it's geared that way, but I guess they have to watch their backs (the district), so to speak. Now, this is the way they are watching it for us too, so that is basically what we hear. We have had many meetings with lawyers that will come in and talk to us about, you know, being careful of doing this, and make sure that you do this, and that kind of stuff. All workshops regarding ideas and types of placement options are classified as voluntary, so I am not sure how well attended they are. (1-8-02)

When discussing the distribution of knowledge regarding special education, Respondent L, the district's special education coordinator, said that school principals are only "somewhat adequately aware of the special education legal mandates" (2-27-02). As coordinator, she had personally learned about these mandates through "the district's lawyers, professional journals and organizations, other area special education coordinators, and through district-wide principals' meetings." Respondent L shared that the principals are supposed to pass on special education information: "It becomes the principals' jobs to get the information to the teachers" (2-27-02).

Most of the respondents expressed appreciation for the special education teacher's knowledge and insight and listed them as a main special education resource. Yet, even though they did not work closely with these special education teachers, the respondents still identified them as probably the most important source of information regarding the special education. Respondent H, a fifth grade pull-out teacher, verbalized praise for Riley Elementary's special education teachers, explaining that they offer a lot of help and insight: "I think that when I first came here, #4 (MR teacher) and Respondent K (pull-out teacher of the learning disabled) were extremely helpful, always willing to help. They make themselves available to us, even though it wasn't really their job to do so." Respondent K shared: "Well, you know, even for us in special education, they change what they are doing all the time. We have a hard time keeping up."

During the focus group interview, Respondent E, the fifth grade inclusion teacher was asked if Respondent H, the fifth grade pull-out teacher, was accepting new ideas and implementing any of her (Respondent E) classroom practices and ideas, which she felt would benefit the fifth grade students:

I think she is a little bit, but I also think that you know, she just takes on an attitude that I am not going to change her because she's done this long enough I'm not going to tell her what to do. It's unfortunate, because I would love to tell her that there's just this whole world out there you just don't know about. But I told her what I was doing this year and told her I was available to ever sit and bounce ideas around. I have shared my curriculum with her, but I have also told her to feel free to make paper airplanes out of it. My biggest area of frustration is planning field trips

with her because we are so different, but we do try and keep the content the same. Personally, I think she is a wonderful person and you can't help but like her. But then you kind of take on the attitude of, professionally I can't change her because she stays in her room and just does her own thing. But she has her strong points, and you know that she is very committed to her class, so in some ways, I just get use to it. I just know I have to take care of my kids the way I think is best. (12-4-01)

### Opportunity for Knowledge Development

Respondent H, the fifth grade pull-out teacher, revealed that teachers spent more time together at Riley Elementary, compared to the amount of time teachers spent together from her old school. This to her was an important element in the obtainment of new knowledge:

I can remember how amazed I was at how much we get to do that (talk) here compared to where I used to teach, because she (her principal) had a tendency to fill up our planning periods with all sorts of things. We didn't even get 30 minutes a day, four days a week. Anyway, we never got to communicate. Of course, nobody could talk at faculty meetings either. And you know, people have families, some people come early, some people stay late, and some just didn't communicate at all. (12-5-01)

When asked if Respondent H felt the amount of time at Riley Elementary was adequate to obtain new knowledge, she said: "No, I am not saying that. I am just saying we aren't totally isolated" (12-5-01). Respondent J, the third grade pull-out teacher, agreed: "I am

happy that we have the freedom to meet if we can just figure out the time factor. But I do think we do good with what time we have” (12-5-01).

Opportunity to obtain knowledge is measured by the proximity of people, changes in the school’s facility, and changes in schedule structure, which ultimately affects the transference of new knowledge. Respondent H reflected on the changes in school schedules and facility formats as affecting this opportunity:

You know, one thing that you all may not remember, like back in my early part of my career, we had a longer lunch period. We had a teachers’ cafeteria, a place where only teachers ate, and then we had a teachers’ lounge. In the teachers’ lounge, we visited and casually drank coffee together. (12-5-01)

Respondent H reminisced about back when she was a student:

Yea, we used to smoke in the lounge, but most importantly, we talked. We communicated. Of course, we talked mostly about our families, but we also talked about our students. Somebody would come in there and have to let off some steam about something, but we also exchanged a lot of ideas then. And you know, we just don’t have that much time anymore. (12-5-01)

### Knowledge as a Change Agent

Respondent L, the district’s special education coordinator, was asked how knowledge affected teachers’ decisions regarding the types of placement options for learning disabled students in the district:

I don't know about the teacher's beliefs, but their professional knowledge base probably impacts their choice of practices when delivering instructions to learning disabled students. That's why there is a team of knowledgeable people at the table during an IEP meeting, including an administrator, a regular education teacher, and a parent and possibly related service personnel. This helps give many view points in deciding specially designed instruction and consideration as to where services will be provided and by whom. The L.D. teacher brings her knowledge and expertise to the team, but the team decides what is best for the child.

(2-21-02)

One concern was the lack of information about special education reaching the building level. Respondent I, the fourth grade pull-out teacher, said "I don't ever hear anything about special education and my requirements as a teacher." Respondent J, the third grade pull-out teacher, added:

Everything I have ever heard has come from other teachers, almost a hearsay kind of thing, but certainly nothing from the district's service center. When I first started teaching here, I didn't know anything. If I hadn't had my teaching partners working with me, which was an awesome team, I don't know what I could have done. I new I could rely on them. I guess we have to rely on our counselor, but all the main concern is whether the paperwork was done right, and that can get confusing as you know. (12-5-01)

Respondent G, the fourth grade inclusion teacher, revealed:

I have to admit it, I promise you that I have never read the mandates and I have taught a long time. I have never been told to read them and they have never been given to me, so it just hasn't happened. The knowledge I have of IDEA has certainly been given to me second hand, I guess I am just functioning on logic, which could be dangerous. (12-4-01)

Respondents E (fifth grade inclusion teacher), I (fourth grade pull-out teacher), and J (third grade pull-out teacher) exhibited little knowledge regarding the special education legal mandates and the available placement options promoting the least restrictive environment for special education students. The diffusion of new knowledge promotes change where the lack of new knowledge promotes the status quo in the classroom. In this study, the pull-out respondents gain new knowledge regarding special education from within the school site where the inclusion respondents go outside the school network to gain this information. This knowledge directs and impacts the types of actions occurring in the classrooms for learning disabled students.

### Perceptions

Understanding and perceptions of new knowledge stands on the driving force behind the acceptance and implementation of actions needed to make individualized placement decisions for learning disabled students. Knowledge of the legal mandates, such as PL 94-142 and IDEA, must first be obtained and understood before informed decisions, promoting the least restrictive environment, can be made for students. A teacher's perceptions support and develop their philosophy of teaching. Interview data

revealed that perceptions affect experiences, philosophical growth and placement options. Perceptions also affect change and in turn, change affects perceptions.

### Experiences

Respondent D, the kindergarten inclusion teacher, said her understanding about special education was developed through her experiences as a paraprofessional for the mentally retarded students. She gained a great understanding of these mentally retarded students through her observations and the time spent with the school's special education teacher: "I can remember when I first started teaching kindergarten, what a difference, but I relied on my contact with her (special education teacher) very much. If I ever had a question, I would just pick up the phone and give her a call" (12-4-01). Respondent D currently has a teacher's assistant in her kindergarten classroom, with whom she spends every day with in the classroom. Their similar backgrounds and understanding of special education students is beneficial to them and their students:

I gain a lot of information from her (the assistant) because of the amount of time we spend together and because of our similar backgrounds. I find that I pick up on a lot of ideas from her (the assistant). I also spend time with one of the speech pathologists from my other school. I call her every chance I get and we still share ideas. (12-4-01)

### Philosophical Growth

Fifth grade inclusion Respondent E shared about the time she spent with fourth

grade pull-out Respondent I, sharing ideas and professionally growing to the point of adhering to the same teaching philosophy. She explained:

I think the reason why we've gotten a little bit closer is because of the ITI Conference and because all of the work we had to do with it, like share ideas. We have probably gotten closer over all the time we have spent writing curriculum for ITI. I think that had a big impact. I do find myself learning from her since we spend so much time together, but then I have to be careful that I don't fall back into the pattern of doing what I have done in the past. It's hard to let go, I want to go in this new direction, but it's really hard to kind of forget what you knew worked a long time ago. I think it is good to have somebody that is going through the same experiences with you because we do have to work on projects and stuff like that together, you know, we probably bounce a lot of ideas back and forth from each other and learn from the time we spend together. It almost becomes a checks and balances. You know, everything we learned in college is really a joke. It's like, after getting out of college and getting into a classroom with other teachers, you get a freedom to start doing things that really work, not just doing things the old traditional way because it is easier. (12-4-01)

Respondent J, the third grade pull-out teacher, opined that different perceptions drive teacher style, thus promoting a needed diversity for students: "by spending time



together, we start to recognize each other's strengths, styles, approaches. We can make sure to place students with a teaching style, or philosophy that will fit his or her needs."

Principal, Respondent A, felt teachers who work together tend over time to share the same or similar philosophies. She remarked:

I think teachers work together who share the same philosophy, not that they change each other's philosophies. I think probably they gravitate to people that do share their same philosophy. I think there are some people that like to be around all kinds of different people, because you like to draw from different ideas even though you don't agree, but people like that. But then there are people who are pretty closed-minded and don't want to hear new ideas. I really think it is a personality trait. (1-8-02).

Searching deeper into the effects relationships and experiences have on the process of changing teachers' philosophies, the fourth grade pull-out Respondent I explained: "Our relationships with our students, our administrator, and the way we're treated can change our point of view." Respondent J, the third grade pull-out teacher, agreed: "Styles develop from experience and the people we work most closely. The trust with one another certainly affects which philosophies we are willing to adopt and try as new." Respondent I further stated:

I worked with a very interesting lady in some unique classroom situations, such as what we are faced with here. I can't even remember her name, but I will never forget the time I spent with her, I certainly attribute some of my teaching styles and philosophies to her. (12-5-01)

Another idea emerging from the data discussion perceptions and philosophical growth was offered by the fifth grade pull-out Respondent H. As the discussion of perceptions progressed, Respondent H shared that she perceives the teaching service at Riley Elementary as a ministry, or a calling from God:

I really think that our teachers that are here are here because God had something to do with it. I think this is a calling to teach here, and I think that people are not happy here if they are not called to do this.

(Respondents J and K strongly agreed with Respondent H with verbal affirmations). We are so badly needed here, and I think so many of our children, they're not taught limits and they don't have adequate consequences or appropriate consequences, and so somebody wants to give them a pill to make them act right. I know that some of them can't help it, but there are also some of them that just haven't been taught to control themselves. But, I feel very strongly that this is a God blessed faculty that we are here for a purpose. This is one of our purposes here on earth to help these children, because we're probably their only chance. We are their only chance. (12-5-01)

### Perceptions and Change

As might be expected, teachers' perceptions of students will drive or influence the decision as to the types of accommodations and placement options would best serve learning disabled students. Teachers in the pull-out focus group seemed somewhat more

negative in their attitude about their students. Third grade pull-out Respondent J, shared her frustrations with her L.D. students:

My low group is just painful to listen to them read. I just sit there thinking, how can I help them? What would be the best thing for them? And I have several that need to be tested, I am working on getting them tested so I can hopefully find some answers to these questions. Unfortunately, I have had some kids tested and they didn't qualify, I just couldn't believe it. The sad part is that these kids will be the ones who fall through the cracks. (12/5/01)

The different perceptions of elementary and middle school teachers concerning placement option choices and accommodations for learning disabled students has raised concern from pull-out Respondents H, I, J, and K. Fourth grade pull-out Respondent I explained:

It worries me, because I have always hated teaching fifth grade because you have to send them off to middle school and no one will talk to you about the students. I have gone over to one of our local middle schools and sat there and visited with a counselor, telling her about a particular student that I felt they needed to be concerned about or needed to be in a special environment. Unfortunately, all they would do is thank me for coming, and blah, blah, blah. I honestly think it went in one ear and out the other. They didn't pay any attention to me at all. (12-5-01)

During the inclusion focus group interview session, inclusion teacher of learning disabled students, Respondent C, shared that her perceptions regarding the importance of

offering placement options had changed drastically due to the time spent in her current team teaching experience with the fourth grade regular education teacher, Respondent G:

This year has brought full change in my beliefs. I use to support a pull-out placement option for all learning disabled students, but now, after working with you (referring to Respondent G) I have changed full circle. Before we taught together, I would have never supported this type of program. I now see the benefits of inclusion placements and feel it is probably best for most kids. (12-4-01)

Respondent L, the district's special education coordinator, did not believe teacher's beliefs or philosophies should drive the types of placement for learning disabled students:

The type of services delivered to a student depends on the community in which you serve. It would all depend on each individual student's needs as to where and what services would be delivered. It would hope that the answer to which is the most prominently used scenario is that whatever is appropriate for each individual child. The child's needs are what drives what services will be delivered. The school system is not set up for school and its teachers' conveniences, it is set up to serve the child as needed. All schools must provide a full continuum of placement services necessary. (2-21-02)

Fifth grade pull-out Respondent H expressed the importance of accommodating students according to the students' needs, recognizing the importance of a diverse placement option system to meet the needs of all learning disabled students:

I don't think inclusion is for everyone, but it is probably the least restrictive environment for most learning disabled students, and if we don't offer it, we are certainly going to miss out on someone, putting them a segregated classroom setting for no reason. (12/5/01)

Teachers in the inclusion focus group maintained a much more positive attitude towards the acceptance and need of change for their learning disabled students.

Respondent E, the fifth grade inclusion teacher, accepted responsibility for educating her L.D. students and recognized that they are trying to the best of their ability:

There are two students in my classroom that need to be identified and I'm in the process of getting that done. I think it will really help them, because right now they're really struggling and feeling like they are falling behind. It's not that they are lazy, it's just that they can't do it. They just have a tough time with it. I figure, it is my responsibility to make sure they succeed. (12-4-01)

IDEA and PL94-142 are legal mandates requiring changes in special education knowledge, perceptions, and actions. However, the respondents in this study admitted that these mandates were not being implemented because educators are being forced to buy-in to something they don't really understand. Principal Respondent A expressed a basic view that any government-directed change, such as the special education legal mandates, is going to present problems of acceptance:

This isn't going to sound very nice, but the legal mandates of IDEA are probably not that effective because it is a government program. And government has to have, they can't police everything, you know. It's just

the way it is set up, the way the system is, it's more on making sure everything looks good on paper, in my opinion. It is amazing that we have all of these mandates and then the numerous amendments to these mandates, but they are really making sure there are no lawsuits. Unfortunately, the papers look good, but the actions in the classrooms are not reflective of this picture, perfect world." (1-8-02).

Fourth grade pull-out Respondent I expressed personal frustration with requirements of the mandates:

They tell us that we have to write a 504 plan, or something, but all that does is cause us more paperwork. it's not really doing anything to help the child. I have to help them anyway, so why bother with the paperwork.

(12-5-01)

Pull-out third grade Respondent J shared her frustration with the paperwork required by law. She expressed the view that the mandated paper work is not going to affect the actions in the classroom: "You won't be doing anything different than you would normally do. It's just more writing of what you're doing and who is going to really read that anyway. It just doesn't make any sense." (12-5-01).

Principal Respondent A believes the lack of funds needed to implement the legally mandated full-continuum of placement options stands out most visibly as the reason change is not occurring:

It all boils down to funds and people. The ideal situation would be if we had a special education teacher at least for every grade level. I mean, we could do all that. We could pull them out when needed, include them

when we felt appropriate. We could pull them out for certain skills and then get them right back on track so they wouldn't miss everything. There would be a purpose for doing things, not just the fill out the papers correctly and fulfilling the paper definition of the mandate. But once again, can you imagine what we could do with more money. We could just rock and roll. Because you know, we'd have a lot of people to help meet the individual needs of all the different kinds of kids. Because in one class, you're going to have children that, you know, run the gamut. You'll have kids that are kindergarten in fifth grade, by ability. So rather than teaching one grade level, you are actually teaching six. (1-8-02)

The district's special education coordinator, Respondent L, expressed surprise that the perception about school funds was considered the driving force blocking implementation of changes to meet requirements of the mandates for special education students: "All schools must provide a full continuum of services necessary. I just can't believe it isn't happening." (2-27-02) Respondent L did not offer any suggestions on how schools could implement a full-range of placement options, but kept focused on the mandated obligation to offer these options for special education students.

Respondent K, pull-out teacher of the learning disabled students, was asked by Principal Respondent A to service her L.D. students in an inclusion classroom, co-teaching with third grade inclusion Respondent F. Respondent K shared she did not feel she had a say in this decision and that she was not prepared to teach students in this setting:

I didn't feel I had much of a choice. I had always serviced my students through pull-out programs, but I didn't feel I could say no to my boss.

Respondent F is a nice enough teacher, I just wasn't really comfortable giving up my classroom for something so unexpected. (12-5-01)

Inclusion Respondent F (third grade) and pull-out teacher of learning disabled students, K, began the year teaching students in a single classroom all day. Throughout the first nine weeks, Respondent K gradually returned the students to a pull-out placement, taking small groups of students to her old classroom for reading instruction, then math instruction, then finally completely back to the original arrangement they had the previous year. Respondent K perceived this relational tie between her and Respondent F forced by the principal, not naturally evolving; therefore change did not stand the test of time. Respondent K, turned back to implementing her original teaching strategies and placement choices for her learning disabled students, which unfortunately may not be the optimal least restrictive environment for each student.

Respondents from the inclusion focus group (12-5-01) expressed the view that time spent with other teachers change perceptions and promotes change in schools. When the respondents of the inclusion focus group were asked if the amount of time spent with any one person increased the likelihood of changing perceptions about teaching, Respondent E, the fifth grade inclusion teacher, said:

I think you can influence each other, but only to a certain degree. I mean, you're not going to change the person completely. But, I do think that people you work closely with, yeah, I think you can influence each other.

But to a point. I mean, if you're at opposite ends of the spectrum,



obviously, you're not going to take them from one to ten, but you might be able to take them to a four. I mean, you might get them a little bit. I think in the past, I've worked with some other special needs teachers where I felt that we kind of had that bouncing back of ideas off each other, so in that way, I think you can influence one another. (12-4-01)

New knowledge obtained through the legal mandates and experiences affects the perceptions held by educators regarding special education. This new knowledge and developing perceptions ultimately then affects the actions implemented in the classrooms.

### Actions

Relationships, knowledge, and perceptions each play an important role in the respondents' decisions regarding the types of actions, through accommodations and placement options, implemented in the classrooms. For the purpose of this study, the specific actions examined are placement options and pedagogical choices used to directly impact the learning successes of learning disabled students.

Specific types of curriculum modifications currently implemented in the classrooms for the learning disabled student population were discussed in detail in both focus group interviews. This data shed light on the philosophical commonalties and diversities evident through these implemented strategies. Discussion of pull-out focus group and inclusion focus group placement options and instructional accommodations are presented below.

### Pull-Out Accommodations

Respondents in the pull-out focus group, discussed challenges associated with the modification of curricula to meet the needs of special education students. These concerns were discussed with much more evidence of frustration. Fourth grade pull-out Respondent I recognized the importance of different teaching styles and expressed views that matching the children to the style of the teacher is an important modification, especially for the learning disabled students. Fifth grade pull-out Respondent H agreed, but admitted: "I am set in my own ways and I hold little patience towards obtaining the optimal modifications needed for each student." (12/5/01) Respondent H further elaborated:

I really admire teachers who can tolerate, you know, all of these little groups going on and all that. I just wasn't educated that way, and I've taught too long the other way, and it drives me nuts. I do it, but I do it and it's really controlled. I don't do it daily, and I should do it more, I should do groups things more with them, or partner things more with them, but I just can't stand it. I've got to have control. I can stand it if they are really on task, but when I have my learning disabled students, they are over there playing and are disrupting the rest of the class. You know, I'm an antique. I really believe principals should let teachers make the decisions regarding the placement of L.D. kids, in a place that will work best for that student. I personally think the ways that have worked best is where the teachers that have them this year and the teachers who are going to have them next

year sit down, with the LD teacher, too, and discuss each child and what environment they learn best in with feedback from the teachers that had had them and from their special education teachers. I have to admit it, I am loud, and I'm assertive, and I'm stern, and there are children that need that and they should be in my room. But, fifth grade inclusion Respondent E is also extremely structured and she's a no-nonsense teacher, so she could do just fine as well. Our classes are often times drained by those kids (L.D. kids) and they feed off each other, they really do. And, I have to admit it, I am at my limit, I think right now because at the end of the day, I am mentally drained. The best teaching year I had was when I taught fourth and fifth grades. I had one L.D. student in fifth grade and none in my fourth grade class that year. Now, my worse year was this third grade class from hell, I mean, straight from it. The only thing that saved me that year was the L.D. teacher who was assertive and stern, but the kids loved her. (12-5-01)

Respondent I admitted that her classroom structure and activities is not always best for learning disabled students:

Yes, it doesn't matter if you are a special education teacher or not, it's just like you can say, I've done my job. Here, you try this, or you know, your type of teaching can handle this better than mine. We can't teach and handle every single issue that comes up in our classroom on any given day on our own, especially with all of these special education students included in our classroom. (12-5-01)

Third grade pull-out Respondent J expressed frustration about trying to accommodate a large number of learning disabled students who are identified as having Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD):

I've got like three or four kids that are ADD and are not on meds (medications). None of my kids are on meds yet, but hopefully will be soon. These kids just can't function, I have experimented with some things, but I have not been very successful. This is only my second year back after being off for ten years. This morning, I just wasn't up for reading with my low kids. I have a low, low group, I put the cassette tape of our story of the week in the Walkmans and gave it to them and said: [H]ere you go. Get your reading book. (12-5-01)

Respondent I, the fourth grade pull-out teacher, used the higher ability students to accommodate the learning disabled students. She did share concern about this strategy and how it affects the higher level ability students, which is one reason she supports pull-out placement for her L.D. students:

What I have tried is to group them (the L.D. kids) at a table, a community table, with some of the higher level kids, and I've got to be quite honest, I've got some really intelligent high level kids, and they just don't like helping the other ones that aren't as high as them. I feel guilty if I say, you know, you are done early, so can you go and help so-and-so? And I really and truly, which it was great when they pulled the special needs kids out into one class, it is easier; however, every class will still have a low one.

I've got a student that was tested last year and didn't qualify, and he read with me yesterday and it was scary. It was very sad. (12-5-01)

The accommodations implemented by the educators represented in the pull-out focus group shared challenges, frustration, and concern regarding the inclusion of learning disabled students in their classrooms. They expressed comfort in their ways of teaching, supporting the status quo even though they know it is not necessarily the best learning environment for their learning disabled students.

### Pull-Out Placement Options

Fifth grade Respondent H admitted that she loses patience with her learning disabled students as the demands get higher. Consequently, she supports the removal of these students from her room:

They're just kids, but still, you know, when you've done it as many years as I have, it gets to a point where you want to just say: "[W]ait your turn, just wait your turn. I don't have time." I mean, like this year I have seven L.D. kids out of 22 and I have four that are to be tested. And those are, all of those kids are practically discipline problems. If they're not discipline problems, they are attention getters. I can tell you that I think that these children that are real low and discipline problems should be pulled out. (12-5-01)

Pull-out third grade Respondent J also voiced support for the pull-out placement options because of the perceived benefit for the higher level students:

It makes it easier for the regular education students. Because to me, this sounds kind of bad, but they get the short end of the stick a lot of times, because they don't get the special attention. They could use some extra help too. All children could use extra help. And sometimes it's unfair because they don't get any extra help. They could use a boost to push them up higher, you know, not just the ones who are the lowest. (12-5-01)

Respondent K, the pull-out teacher of the learning disabled, supports pull-out special education programs because she believes these students are not being accommodated in the regular classroom:

You have to realize that I think it is good for the L.D. kids to be pulled out because I think in the past what I've seen, especially the older grades, third grade and above, is they spend most of their day sitting there doing nothing, because the teacher is spread too thin. And I think the way you know, my pulling them out is making a difference, I'm hoping, is by helping her (the regular education teacher) to be able to gear her teaching to one level. It helps me because I can then gear my teaching to one level too. (12-5-01)

The pull-out placement decision of learning disabled students is supported by these respondents. Common themes regarding the need for pull-out placement include L.D. students are discipline problems, concern that higher level students' needs are not being reached because of increased assistant needs of L.D. students, and L.D. students' needs are not being met in the regular class, therefore, need to be educated in a pull-out classroom setting.

### Inclusion Accommodations

Kindergarten inclusion Respondent D expressed the belief that using the ITI Model is a great way to hold the teacher accountable for the success of all learners, including learning disabled students:

This model just does it for you, you have to show consciousness of eight learning styles and if you try to write your lesson plans, you know that you had better be prepared for something for the kinesthetic learners, and something for the visual learners, and that kind of things...I think we often times waste kids' time when we don't modify to meet their strengths...

Now, we are fortunate at our school because I truly believe that all of our teachers believe in the philosophy that all children can learn. And if that is your philosophy, then you're going to normally make those adaptations to make sure that the student is successful as much as possible. And I'm speaking from a scholastic standpoint as opposed to a social one. We make these different decisions because we are different teachers. (12-4-01)

Respondent E, fifth grade teacher, said she only has two students identified as learning disabled. For these two students, she implements several creative modification strategies and higher level thinking skills to help provide success and higher level learning for her two L.D. students:

My two students are pulled out for their learning disabilities, either in reading, writing, or math. Basically, they're just served, pulled out just kind of as a resource kind of basis as opposed to an inclusion where they

stay in the classroom. When they are in my classroom, I do make some minor modifications for other students, like shortened assignments. I also do books on tape for their reading. If they are struggling with multiplication, I give them a chart to use so they don't feel completely left out. Small things like that to provide them with different methods of practice in the classroom and at home. Getting the right answer can't be the only goal. I think we need to make sure they understand what they are doing and how they come up with these answers. I don't care if they can give me 50 right answers, if they don't have the reasoning skills, then what's the purpose? We shouldn't just shoot for the lowest level of learning for any students, to just get them through life. We should want higher levels of thinking that we want all children to attain. If we work only on remediation, they're not ever going to get the opportunity to do the problem solving, and the analyzing, and thinking through things that may carry a longer term effect. This type of learning will promote the growth of a productive citizen and member of society, and isn't that what teaching is all about? (12-4-01)

When the respondents of the pull-out focus group were asked why teachers serve special education students differently, the fourth grade pull-out Respondent I said: "Different teaching styles, different learning styles". Asked further where teachers get these styles, she explained: "Experience, I think experiences we gain from those around us. I guess our philosophy just evolves" (12-5-01).



The focus of the accommodations held by the inclusion respondents is based on the premise that all students can succeed. These respondents are aware of student differences and strive to build a curriculum to optimize each learner's strengths. Change in these classrooms occurs through creative pedagogical modifications for learning disabled students through new relationships, knowledge, and perceptions.

### Inclusion Placement Options

The challenge of implementing change within the classroom became evident through the inclusion focus group data. Third grade teacher Respondent F said that she had worked with Respondent K, pull-out teacher of the learning disabled, trying to create an inclusive classroom for her learning disabled students, but they had evolved back to pull-out methods for certain things:

All of my students except three are classified as learning disabled right now, and some of them are pulled out by the L.D. teacher for short periods of time while I work with the other kids on specific things like reading skills. She takes them for phonetic things and works with them on decoding skills and those sorts of skills, where I work more with their comprehension and writing skills. (12-4-01)

The principal, Respondent A, encouraged this co-teaching situation between third grade inclusion Respondent F and pull-out teacher of the learning disabled, Respondent K, attempted to offer an inclusion placement option for the learning disabled students, but:

She gravitated back to the same practices she use to do. I had set her up to work with Respondent F, but she just couldn't function that way. So

rather than have a fit and say “You are going to work that way,” I gave in and saw it as maximizing her strengths. I just decided that’s you can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear, so to speak. You just can’t. And it’s not worth it, because what would happen is she would rebel and she would end up doing it the way she wants to do it because that is her philosophy, and you know, it is successful for her and she does a good job at it. She tends to isolate herself, which might be one main reason she never really changes. (1-8-02)

Fifth grade inclusion Respondent E added that many districts do nothing but inclusion. She remembered working in her old school under an assistant principal who had taught special education inclusion classes in the past. She elaborated:

Her (assistant principal) experiences as a special education teacher totally controlled her beliefs about how and where learning disabled students should be served. She was very deeply rooted in these beliefs and felt teachers were slacking if they didn’t try to service L.D. students in the regular classroom. She always pointed out that legally this is what you do as a teacher, you have to keep them and you have to do this, this, and this. I basically felt like it was my full responsibility which was hard, but I did come to appreciate my accountability to all of my students, and to her I am thankful for this. I know the mandates call for the least restrictive environment for all students. I think social reasons are important and that we must realize that one day these students are going to have a job and that they are not going to be separated from society. In order to be successful,

they have to work with other people. I think more than anything, we owe it to these students to include them for social purposes. (12-4-01)

Respondent C, the inclusion teacher of learning disabled students agreed with Respondent E:

I have seen great social growth since our learning disabled students had been serviced in our inclusion classroom. They feel a part, they have learned to work together, and they know how to appreciate differences. I think it is important to start all learning disabled students in an inclusive classroom setting and then work down from there to maximize the least restrictive environment. I think that is my understanding of IDEA.

Unfortunately, we tend to start them off in the most restrictive environment, in an environment that is comfortable for us (the teachers) and easier for us to instruct. I will say, it takes a lot of planning to successfully include all of the different students in one room, but the benefits have been rewarding for me and for the students. We actually had one of our learning disabled students ask us if he had been tested out of special education. He was so proud of himself at that moment. I really think the increase in experiences has helped increase his vocabulary and everything about the brain research tells us that they need those unique experiences rather than ditto sheets. We just shouldn't push remediation so much. (12-4-01)

During principal Respondent A's individual interview, she spoke of the social and academic benefits her learning disabled students gained in an inclusion classroom setting:

The kids in this class use to be in the office all of the time. They would hide under tables, shut down, cry, and fight. We were constantly on the phone with their parents. We referred to them as the “sweathogs,” that’s what they were. We would just dread seeing one of these kids coming. Now, Respondents C and G have these kids engaged in learning, involved in an inclusive classroom and it is now a rarity to have one of these children shut down and not function. So, this type of story convinces me that inclusion certainly has to be looked at as the first choice of least restrictiveness. It goes back to Maslow’s hierarchy, and they have to feel like they belong. Well, if they are constantly being pulled out here and there, you know. How can they ever feel like they belong and are a part of the class? Unfortunately, I can’t seem to promote this type of placement and service changes in all of my teachers. I guess they either don’t know how to do it or they just can’t see the benefits. (1-8-02)

Respondent A further expressed the view that teachers’ philosophies and perceptions totally affect the decisions they make regarding the placement of learning disabled students as well as the modifications activated in their classrooms:

I think perceptions of how we place and serve learning disabled students needs to be revisited and teachers need to obtain knowledge regarding the alternatives available. I think the traditional way can work, and that it all depends on the student. Sometimes the students need to be pulled out, at least for short times to bring up their skills. For whatever reason, they have gaps in their education, so this requires some special helps, but you

know, for the most part, I think inclusions will work for most of these students. I truly believe that the way we service learning disabled students has evolved over time, from just pulling them out for all skills to including them all the way. My main problem with pull-out programs is that the kid misses out on everything else that's going on in the classroom, so I do have a problem with that. It would bother me as a parent, if I had a child who was being pulled out constantly, I would be asking what are they missing out on, because they are missing something. They are missing the inclusion of the classroom, the community building, the sense of who they are within that classroom, because it all changes when you even move one child out. One other possible problem is when the special education teacher takes a kid out of the classroom and tries to do the same thing they are doing in the classroom, the same way, even probably in a more traditional way than many of the regular education teachers are doing it, and what are you doing to that kid? I feel you are setting him up. You know, you're not looking at their intelligences and what they're capable of. You know, you're just giving them more of the same thing. And you're going to get more of the same thing if you give more of the same thing and how can this be of benefit? (1-8-02)

Inclusion respondents believe student placement decisions should be based on the uniqueness of each learner. Inclusion opportunities have increased experiences and vocabulary development of learning disabled students in inclusion settings. Respondents

shared the benefits of inclusion for their students, but also expressed the need for teacher acceptance of such a classroom placement.

### Sociograms of School Network

Using the data collected in this study, three sociograms were developed depicting the network of relationships within this school (Figures 1, 2, & 3, Appendix E): “shared philosophy network” among respondents and their significantly listed others (see Figure 1, Appendix E), relational patterns for gaining instructional information (see Figure 2, Appendix E), and the “strong and weak ties” of the school’s relational network (see Figure 3, Appendix E). Respondents are identified by letter and other members mentioned as significant are identified by numbers.

“In a graph, nodes represent actors and lines represent ties between actors” (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 94). In Figures 1, 2, and 3 (Appendix E) individuals are depicted as squares, for the purpose of adding information to clearly identify a respondent. Due to the special education focus of this study, the squares representing special education teachers are blue to highlight their teaching position. A solid line is used to show an association between the two attached respondents and arrows are used to show the direction of their association, either mutual or one-way. A mutual relationship is defined as a shared teaching philosophy (see Figure 1, Appendix E) or the gaining new information from both connected respondents (see Figure 2, Appendix E).

In Figures 1 and 2 (Appendix E), respondents’ squares are connected with solid lines with an arrow on each end if the sharing of philosophies or information is mutual.

These directional arrows demonstrate the existence of either one-way relationships or mutual relationships.

Figure 3 (Appendix E) depicts the social network with strong ties between respondents, represented by solid lines and weak ties, represented by dotted lines. “Weak ties provide people with access to information and resources beyond those available in their own social circle” (Granovetter, 1983, p. 209). These “bridges” (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1364) or weak ties become important avenues to change and passageway to the diffusion of new ideas, where strong ties demonstrate areas of status quo acceptance and support. The strength of a relational tie is determined by the respondent’s description of another. A relationship described as “friends” shows the development of a strong tie. Relationships described as “professional” or “acquaintances” represent weak tie development (Granovetter, 1973).

#### Shared Philosophy Network

This sociogram (Figure 1 - Appendix E) depicts the shared philosophy network of the study’s respondents: administration, inclusion, and pull-out. These groups represent the homogenous interview groups.

Data revealed the principal and counselor both shared philosophies with other principals and counselors within the district, which they attributed to the commonalities in work responsibilities and experiences. Data supporting the mutual relationships from these other principals and counselors to Respondents A and B was not collected therefore cannot be presented. Principal Respondent A also shared fourth grade pull-out Respondent I’s philosophy, which is directed by the ITI Model, a model the principal

strongly advocates. Philosophies focusing on special education issues, such as placement and accommodations were not developed, except by fourth grade inclusion Respondent G who has sought outside information regarding special education legal mandates.

Mutually, shared philosophies were evident across the inclusion respondents, with four pairs of respondents sharing common beliefs. Of the pull-out respondents, only one pair showed a shared philosophy, fourth grade pull-out Respondent I with fifth grade inclusion Respondent E. Common teaching philosophies were not evident across any grade level respondent pairs, nor evident between the two L.D. teachers, Respondents C and K.

Three islands of respondents were revealed when analyzing shared philosophical data. Pull-out third grade Respondent J and pull-out teacher of learning disabled, Respondent K convey they only share philosophy with one other respondent and no other respondent listed Respondents J or K as sharing their philosophies. Counselor Respondent B also seemed isolated, since he only perceives sharing philosophy with other counselors.

#### Gain New Instructional Information Network

This sociogram (Figure 2 - Appendix E) depicts the study's respondents and whom they gain new instructional information. Respondent A and Respondent B, mostly sought new information from other principals and counselors within the district. Principal Respondent A and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade inclusion Respondent F mutually identified each other as sources of new knowledge. Respondent F is a national board certified teacher, which is important to Respondent A. Pull-out teacher of learning disabled Respondent K



is the only person counselor Respondent B goes to for instructional knowledge. He seeks confirmation of special education legalities from Respondent K.

Respondent L, district's special education director, gains certain instructional information from principal Respondent A. Respondent L expected Respondent A to perceive her as a source of special education knowledge, but according to Respondent A, this transference of knowledge is not taking place.

Within the inclusion group of respondents, four respondents identified other inclusion respondents as information sources. Fifth grade inclusion Respondent E seeks information from pull-out fourth grade Respondent I because they are both actively training and sharing the direction of the ITI Model. Third grade Inclusion Respondents F and fourth grade Respondent G seek new knowledge from outside sources, forming weak ties with conference presenters and college professors. Respondent F gains new knowledge in math instruction and national board certification requirements. Respondent G seeks new information about special education. Neither learning disabled teachers, inclusion Respondent C nor pull-out Respondent K seek information outside the school's network.

No mutual ties exist across pull-out and inclusion focus groups when considering sources of new knowledge. Sharing of instructional knowledge is apparent across grade levels: Third grade pull-out Respondent J to third grade inclusion Respondent F; fourth grade pull-out Respondent I to fourth grade inclusion Respondent G; and fifth grade inclusion Respondent E and fifth grade, pull-out Respondent H.

### Strong and Weak Tie Network

This sociogram (Figure 3 - Appendix E) depicts the network of strong and weak tie development between the study's respondents. Strong ties are described as friends or acquaintance and weak ties are described as professional. (Granovetter, 1973) The description "acquaintance" was not used to explain relationships at Riley, which may be due to the closeness of this school network. The respondents sharing teaching philosophies (Figure 1, Appendix E) maintain strong ties. The strength of a tie brings out similarities, so shared philosophies increase the strength of these ties. (Granovetter, 1973)

Respondent A and the third grade inclusion Respondent F describe their relationship as friends, forming a mutual strong tie. Respondent A identified other principals, and Respondent B identified other counselors, as professional, forming weak ties, bridging new information. Respondent L, district's special education director, identifies Respondents A and B as professional, but Respondents A and B do not describe this relationship with Respondent L as mutual.

Strong ties connect all the teacher respondents at some part within the network. All inclusion respondents, except inclusion teacher of learning disabled Respondent C, are connected to people outside Riley Elementary through weak tie development. These relations involve Riley teachers who are not teaching learning disabled students, university professors, and conference presenters. Respondent I, fourth grade, is the only pull-out respondent who has developed weak ties. These ties have promoted new knowledge regarding the ITI Model, but no new knowledge pertaining to special education.

There are no reported ties across grade level groups. The fifth grade pull-out Respondent H described her relations to all respondents as friends, but no one shared in this relationship description. The fourth grade inclusion Respondent G is the only teacher actively developing weak ties with people holding special education knowledge. This respondent is the one currently co-teaching with the teacher of learning disabled and promoting inclusion for her learning disabled students.

### Summary

The three sociograms depict data explaining the relationships of gaining information, shared philosophies, and the strong and weak ties within the school's relational network. The inclusion respondents show effort towards developing weak ties with new people, bridging new knowledge to their classroom. Though these weak ties are existent, limited change has been promoted in the special education placement options and learning accommodations. The data clearly reveals weak ties as vehicles of new knowledge, but the content of the new knowledge is as important as the vehicle, or tie, itself.

An integrated expression of shared knowledge is evident across each of the inclusion respondents, where the pull-out respondents express a shared philosophy with only one other person. Pull-out respondents were very clear regarding the elements of their teaching philosophy where inclusion respondents seemed to hold a more ambiguous, evolving philosophy.

A much more complicated strong and weak tie network was evident amongst the inclusion respondents where the pull-out respondents have limited interaction, or tie

development. Though the network has many influences for knowledge obtainment, limited ties with those holding needed special education knowledge have been created, promoting the perpetuation of traditional placement options and learning accommodations for all students.

### Chapter Summary

The data collected from respondents through the vehicle of focus groups and individual interviews and network analysis has been presented and summarized in this chapter, and will serve as a reference point for Chapter V's analysis of the data. Through use of the data, I will examine the specific teachers' ties and the impact of these social networks upon their knowledge of and their willingness to accept and implement changes needed to obtain the "least restrictive environment" for students with learning disabilities as clearly defined and legally supported by special education mandates. Answers to the proposed research questions will be presented in Chapter V as the data collected are analyzed.

## CHAPTER V

### ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Analysis of the data collected in this study focused on described school relationships and tie characteristics, as defined by Granovetter (1973), with the ultimate goal of answering the following questions:

1. How does Granovetter (1973; 1983) network analysis (strength of ties) explain those perceptions, knowledge, and activities?
2. What other realities exist which do not fit within Granovetter's frame of reference?
3. How useful is the framework of Granovetter for explaining the realities revealed?

For the purpose of this study, the strength of interpersonal ties of the teachers at Riley Elementary were viewed in accordance to their small-scale interactions, which could ultimately drive the diffusion (Granovetter, 1973) of new perceptions, knowledge, and actions. The special education legal mandates outline requirements, which should drive the placement and service accommodation options for learning disabled students.

Nine teachers, identified and chosen for the study, were selected based on the observed special education practices in their classrooms. Two focus groups were created from this identification process, one representing pull-out placement practices and one

representing inclusion practices for learning disabled students. Both focus groups had a L.D. teacher and one teacher from grades third, fourth, and fifth. The inclusion focus group had an additional member, a Kindergarten teacher.

### Demographic Data

The demographic data presented in Chapter IV were analyzed to examine ways in which the participants' educational experience, career teaching experience, and teaching experience at Riley Elementary may have served as contributing factors to the relational patterns affecting the decisions regarding the learning placement of learning disabled students (see Table 1, p. 63). Patterns of relationships are noted below.

#### Educational Experience

Each respondent held a minimum of a bachelor's degree according to the requirements for a teaching certification as set by the State Department of Education. The two administrative respondents, the principal and the counselor, held at least a Masters degree per the administrative certification requirements, also set by the State Department of Education.

Only one member of the inclusion focus group held a Master's degree (Respondent K) while two members of the pull-out focus group had earned Master's degrees (Respondents E and F). This difference between the groups appears minimal. In fact, one might think that those with additional educational experiences would support less traditional pull-out strategies for students with disabilities. In this population, that was not the case.

Four of the five inclusion respondents have actively been involved in professional development education. Only one of four pull-out respondents had engaged in self-initiated, outside professional development opportunities. One could speculate that the inclusion respondents have developed weak ties through these experiences and have gained new information which they implemented in their classrooms. Conversely, the pull-out respondents, despite additional educational experiences gained through pursuit of the Masters degree, have maintained the same perceptions, knowledge, and activities, which have promoted the status quo of activities for their students.

Looking specifically at special education professional development, the pull-out respondents had attended no professional development opportunities regarding special education and only one inclusion respondent had actively pursued new knowledge in this arena. Special education knowledge was not being transferred through the respondents' special education professional development experiences.

### Career Teaching Experience

The average number of total career teaching years of all the respondents was 11 years. The range of career teaching years of the pull-out group was three to 28 years and from five to 12 years in the inclusion group (see Table 1, p. 63). In examining the ties of these teachers, no direct linkage could be drawn between the career teaching experience and the relationships among the respondents. Equally, no connection could be made between the average teaching experience among the pull-out focus group and the inclusion focus group. Career experience for each group is equal.

### Teaching Experience at Riley Elementary

The average number of teaching years at Riley Elementary is approximately three years, with the highest being ten years and the lowest being two years. Of the nine participating teachers, five respondents, C, E, H, J, and K had taught at Riley Elementary for only two years. Of these five respondents, all fell within the inclusion focus group, except for Respondent J. Respondents D, H, and I had only taught at Riley Elementary for three years and Respondent K had taught at this school site for four years (see Table 1, p. 63). Again, there appears to be no material differences between years of teaching experience and choices for inclusion and/or pull-out programming.

### Summary

The influence of educational levels and the number of years of career teaching experience does not appear to have affected the development of ties between the respondents at Riley Elementary. Since teachers must have a minimum of a bachelor's degree, educational attainment was at least this high or higher in some instances. The respondents in the inclusion and pull-out focus groups have equal number of years experience of college education. The professional development choice seems relevant. Those engaging in professional development are members of the inclusion group.

### Interview and Sociogram Data

Through the lens of Network Analysis (Granovetter 1973, 1976, 1983) I have identified and analyzed the strength of the relationships, or ties, within this school



network, and assessed the influences of these relationships (Wasserman & Faust, 1994) on decisions regarding the placement and service decisions for learning disabled students. As defined by Granovetter (1973) a tie is the interaction between two or more individuals, a relationship that can be classified and measured as either strong, weak, or absent. I believe that patterns of present and future changes within a school network can be obtained through the identification and depiction of these ties. "Individuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends" (Granovetter, 1983, p. 202).

Because only a representative sample of respondents was purposefully selected for the study, analysis of the data will focus only on the ties between this study's respondents and the outside members listed by these respondents. The interview data revealed information regarding the four characteristics needed for tie development: reciprocity, emotional intensity, time, and intimacy (Granovetter, 1973). They are the focus of this analysis.

Granovetter's (1973) tie characteristics (intimacy, reciprocity, emotional intimacy, and time) were evident in the three social networks which emerged from the collected data. To assist in the investigation of this data, three sociograms were formed, developing a graphic representation of the reported relational tie characteristics of the respondents at Riley Elementary. The structure of a social network depicts people as points and relations as connecting lines. (Granovetter, 1976) To allow for a fuller understanding of the sociograms, people are represented as squares with identifying information attached concerning professional position and philosophy held for serving

learning disabled students, pull-out or inclusion. These sociograms were used as structural analytical tools to determine and illustrate the presence of ties among the respondents, other teachers, and other relevantly mentioned people. “Structural analysis refers not only to relations among individuals but also, and very crucially, to the structure of those relations” (Granovetter, 1986, p. 82).

The sociograms are consistent with Wasserman and Faust’s (1994) description of network analysis, providing a “graphical representation using points to depict actors and lines to depict channels of communication” (p. 13). The groups and individual structures, depicted on the sociograms, serve as effective analysis of interview and demographic data obtained. The sociograms contributed significant analysis information to answer research questions examining teachers’ ties and the impact of these social networks upon the knowledge of and willingness to accept and implement changes needed to obtain the optimal least restrictive environment for students with learning disabilities. Information obtained through these sociograms represents each quality of a tie, or relationship. The shared philosophy sociogram exhibits intimacy, gaining information network represents reciprocity, and emotional intensity is illustrated through the strong and weak tie sociogram. Time is a characteristic that is present to have intimacy, reciprocity, and emotional intensity, therefore is present in each of the three outlined sociograms. Time is evident between all the relationships within the Riley network, in varying degrees.

### Reciprocity

Reciprocity refers to the intrinsic, mutual benefits individuals receive within a relationship and tie development.(Granovetter, 1973) Discussion about important

elements of the respondents' relationships became the primary emerging theme regarding this concept of tie development. Varying views of reciprocation emerged within the two focus groups. The inclusion focus group's discussion turned into a brainstorming session of sharing ideas and possibilities for creating a beneficial environment for learning disabled students. On the other hand, the session with the pull-out focus group was marked with concern and despair between the teachers. The common themes of reciprocity in a relationship dealt with advice and direction, including: sharing, compromise, teacher/administrative support, and trust.

Sociogram Data. Reciprocity is the evident tie characteristic exhibited through the gaining information network sociogram. Reciprocity represents the "intrinsic, mutual benefits" shared between individuals in a relationship, or tie development. (Granovetter, 1973) At Riley Elementary, sharing information about National Board Certification and the ITI Model is promoted by the school's principal and is considered the current professional development focus at Riley Elementary. Riley's principal has required all teachers to attend the initial and advanced sessions of ITI. Additionally, all the teachers must be implementing stage 1 of this model in their classrooms. However, the teachers are not required to gain new information about special education mandates and curricula options for learning disabled students. This deficiency is quite evident through the lack of information to promote further reform for the Riley students. Ironically, Riley has a very large population of learning disabled students some of which are being serviced without individual consideration for the students, as the legal mandates outline.

Respondents were asked to list the people who they most often approach to gain new instructional knowledge. Figure 2 (Appendix E) illustrates the emerging network depicting these relationships and Respondents I and F were identified by several respondents as important sources of such information. Respondent I, pull-out fourth grade teacher, is actively pursuing further professional development opportunities with the ITI Model and actively implements an advanced stage of this model in her classroom. Inclusion Respondent F, third grade inclusion teacher, completed the National Board Certified Teacher program. Since the ITI Model is mandated and the National Board Certified program is encouraged at Riley Elementary, it makes sense that teachers would turn to these respondents for this new information.

Inclusion third grade Respondent F keeps close contact with college professors and other conference presenters. This variety of resources has created bridges for new knowledge to reach her and the other respondents with whom she works. “Heterophilous links with socially and spatially distant others are usually stronger in carrying information about new ideas to an individual” (Rogers, 1995, p. 311). One respondent benefiting from inclusion Respondent F’s outside knowledge was pull-out Respondent J:

I go to Respondent F all the time with questions because I can bank on the fact that she will know the answer. She has kept in touch with her university professors and participates in university study groups. She is always trying new teaching methods in her classroom that I steal from her. I guess I probably go to her because she does have her National Board Certificate and I know she has learned so much through this process. (J, 12/4/01)

Respondent J was further asked if she had ever gone to Respondent F for answers to questions regarding special education, she said: “No, special education is not her area of expertise. I think this is the first year she has ever taught special education kids” (J, 12/4/01).

There is a need for the development of ties with people who can bridge new knowledge to improve our special education programs. Though the special education legal mandates have been in place and there is expectation for classroom implementation of these mandates, it's not happening. One reason might be that reliable, new knowledge is not reaching the classrooms to make the legal mandates possible for the learning disabled students. The strong ties which have developed across the Riley teaching faculty has perpetuated the status quo for learning disabled students. Except for the one inclusion Respondent who has developed weak ties attaching the needed sources of knowledge about special education options to create new classroom actions benefitting the learning disabled students and fulfilling the legal mandates in place since the 1970s, little direct action is taking place.

Fourth grade Pull-out Respondent I and Respondent E, 5<sup>th</sup> grade inclusion teacher, reciprocated the sharing influence they have over each other's obtained knowledge. Respondent E also listed Respondents A and H as sources of new knowledge, but no reciprocation was evident from these respondents. Respondent H listed only Respondent I. Respondents E, H, and I form a triangle of influence, with Respondent E, an inclusion respondent, being the only one within this triangle seeking new knowledge, creating a weak tie development which could ultimately permeate the knowledge bank of the respondents represented in this relational triangle.

Further analysis of the data represented on Figure 2 (Appendix E), revealed a reciprocal relationship between inclusion Respondents C (teacher of learning disabled), F (third grade), and G (fourth grade) forming a triangle of ties with influences from Respondents' F and G's outside influences affecting the knowledge gained among the respondents of this triangle. Proximity may explain the closeness of the triangular relationship between C, F, and G because their classroom is located in the same hall, they are expected to teach the same curricula, and they are faced with a high learning disabled student population in their classes. These respondents in this relational triangle have shared information regarding special education and are actively servicing students with similar practices and placement strategies in their classrooms. Respondent F and K began the school year offering inclusion as a student placement option for their learning disabled students. Respondent F was faced with challenges because Respondent K, her special education co-teacher, decided she did not want to participate in inclusion and reverted back to servicing learning disabled students in a pull-out placement strategy for Respondents' F and K's students because she was not comfortable teaching students in an inclusive classroom because she had never taught this way.

Interview Data. The district's special education coordinator, Respondent L, was asked about the source and route that special education legal mandate information takes to reach the educators in the schools. Regarding the flow of information, there was conflicting data from Respondent L to principal Respondent A. Respondent L stated she had given special education information to the district's principals, but Respondent A and teacher respondents have not received any special education information regarding

placement options and learning accommodations from Respondent L. The characteristics seem to be missing between Respondent L and teacher respondents and limited with Riley's administration because reciprocation within this relationship is not apparent. A conflict in communication is revealed through the collected data.

Respondent L believes the special education information is making it to the principals and that if teachers are not getting the mandate information, it is because principals are not doing their job. Respondent L states: "It becomes the principal's job to get the information to the teachers" (2-27-02). Respondent L further states a belief that people knowledgeable in special education are available within each school:

I don't know about the teachers' beliefs, but their professional knowledge base probably impacts their choice of practices when delivering instructions to learning disabled students. That's why there is a team of knowledgeable people at the table during an IEP meeting, including an administrator, a regular education teacher, and a parent and possibly related service personnel. (2-21-02)

Respondent L conveyed a strong opinion that "all schools must provide a full continuum of services necessary. I just can't believe this isn't happening" (2-27-02).

Riley's respondents share a concern that a clear bridge for new special education knowledge dissemination to the schools has apparently not been formed with Respondent L or with any other primary special education resource at the district level. Third grade pull-out Respondent J discussed the lack of special education information she obtains from the district administrators: "Everything I have ever heard has come from other teachers, almost a hearsay kind of thing, but certainly nothing from the district's service

center” (12-5-01). Fourth grade inclusion Respondent G has never been told to read the legal mandates and has independently sought out any knowledge she holds regarding special education:

I have to admit it, I promise you that I have never read the mandates and I have taught a long time. I have never been told to read them and they have never been given to me, so it just hasn't happened. The knowledge I have of IDEA has certainly been given to me second hand, I guess I am just functioning on logic, which could be dangerous. (12-4-01)

Reciprocity among the respondents, though apparent in many ways, was not found in the sharing of new special education knowledge. This lack of information dissemination may possibly explain why a continuum of placement options, legal mandates, and varying service accommodation strategies are not being met in our schools.

Sharing. Respondents in both focus groups verbalized a great willingness to share, with one another, materials and ideas to benefit the learning disabled students.

Responses like these were made regarding sharing:

It is nice to be able to really bounce ideas off each other and share the various problems you experience with each other . . . I learned from her and the kids have done great with the program. I have now shared this program with many of my other teacher friends in other buildings.

(inclusion group, F, 12-4-01)

We need to work as a team. (pull-out group, H, 12-5-01)



I've talked with people in other schools that didn't want to share ideas and didn't want to share their materials, but you know, I don't know anybody like that here. (H, 12-5-01)

I can tell people that I have learned from her and that there are things that I take from her everywhere I go. (pull-out group, J, 12-5-01)

The willingness to share ideas was a common element and had no apparent bearing on the direct, knowledge, perceptions, and actions affecting decisions for special education. Discussion about the implementation of new ideas and the obtainment of new ideas becomes very relevant and will be discussed more fully later in this chapter.

Compromise. Compromise is a quality of reciprocity that respondents found important in developing relationships. Again, both groups agreed there must be give and take in any relationship:

I think we all have strengths in areas that we build off of. We have to be able to look and take what will work for us and be willing to block what will not work for our kids. (inclusion group, F, 12-4-01)

You can have different ideas and there's always compromise...I just cannot imagine having two people with the same philosophies or two people with the same anything, really, because everybody's coming from a different direction. You might have similar ideas, but you're not going to mesh on everything. (J, 12-5-01)

Compromising in relationships involves respecting and accepting differences as it helps teaching philosophies evolve for the benefit of a teacher's professional growth.

Support. Teacher and administrative support were discussed as elements to of reciprocity in a professional relationship. Respondents in the pull-out group saw this professional support as important in overcoming challenges created by the students with learning disabilities. “I have to admit it, I just couldn’t tolerate him (learning disabled student) anymore, and I mean, I’ll keep anyone else’s students any day, I had four yesterday. I just had to get this child out of my room” (J, 12/5/01). Each respondent shared a reciprocal care and support for each other: “I think all of us love each other and are supportive of each other” (K, 12/5/01).

The school principal’s support was also mentioned in both groups as an element promoting reciprocity in a relationship: “Having a supportive principal is crucial. I mean, one who allows you to make the decisions and is not oppressive . . . And I think a principal who encourages you to get out there, and to learn things, and to know to put forth the best practices, that’s the kind of change agent a school needs” (inclusion, F, 12/4/01).

Trust. Trust was also recognized as a quality of reciprocity in a relationship. Inclusion Respondents C and G described trust as the driving force of change in their classroom and an important reciprocal quality in their personal relationship. “We already had a bond and an acceptance that we were different and that we didn’t need to see everything eye-to-eye. It is certainly a respect issue” (C, 12/4/01). A reciprocal trust between the principal and the teachers was shown as appreciated and needed in a quality relationship. The principal stated:

I have found that what a teacher likes to do will be done well, and what they don't like to do, they'll sabotage, and they'll do it the way they want to anyway, so what is the point...I just trust that they take the students' needs and interests into account when making their decisions, and I think they do. (A, 1-8-01)

Unfortunately, this type of trust can be taken for granted and ultimately contributed to the status quo because the teacher is not pressed to change; and thereby perpetuate the same placement and pedagogy activities in the classroom.

Pull-out focus group Respondent H, a fifth grade teacher, exhibited a two part description of reciprocity in a relationship: the reciprocity of sharing ideas and the reciprocity of accepting ideas. She expressed a willingness to share ideas and materials. "I'm not afraid to ask anybody for anything, and I hope no one's afraid to ask me for anything to borrow or share ideas" (12/4/01). But, she was not as willing to accept and implement new ideas in her class: "You certainly can't teach an old dog new tricks, so why try?" (pull-out group, H, 1/10/02). When asked why she expressed a willingness to share knowledge and actions, but not a willingness to act on this, she said "Our faculty does share and I am always available to share ideas, I just can't promise you that I am going to change. I have picked up ideas along the way, but now, I have just done this too long" (H, 1/10/02). During the inclusion focus group, Respondent E (Respondent H's grade level team partner), shared her experiences with Respondent H: "I get a little frustrated working with Respondent H because we can't bounce ideas around because I know she is set in her ways, but I love her to death and realize I just have to accept her how she is" (E, 12/4/01).

Analysis of these statements indicated that reciprocity of varying degrees was evident and important to the relationships at Riley Elementary. The mutual rewards included assistance with students, idea sharing, trusting one another, and the willingness to compromise instead of tangible rewards. The pull-out respondents showed a willingness to share and listen to new ideas, but overall acceptance and willingness to act on these ideas was not apparent. The inclusion respondents went a step further and were willing to accept new ideas, but also to accept the challenge of implementing them into their classrooms practices as they sought innovative methods to optimize the learning of their students.

### Emotional Intensity

The second characteristic of a tie, as defined by Granovetter (1973) is “emotional intensity” which includes the different emotions involved between the members of a relationship. To determine the emotional intensity of identified ties, respondents were asked questions about the length of their relationships and how they describe their relationships: friend, professional, or acquaintance (Granovetter, 1973).

Interview Data. The respondents at Riley Elementary have formed a close-knit group, therefore describing their relationships as “acquaintances” or “professional” did not appear applicable. Each respondent recognized that there is a professional element to their relationship, but that they mainly identify themselves as friends, creating a concentrated, network of strong ties. “Weak ties are more likely to link members of different small groups than are strong ones, which tend to be concentrated within

particular groups” (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1376). Riley’s teachers appeared to represent this concentrated group of strong ties as discussed by Granovetter (1973).

Interview data revealed that the only relationship described as an “acquaintance” was that between Respondent A, the principal, and Respondent L, the special education district administrator. These two respondents were familiar with each other’s names, but had never spoken to each other. Respondent A vaguely remembers Respondent L speaking at formal district meetings regarding special education law and Respondent L knew Respondent A was a principal for this district.

Teachers knew each other for varying lengths of time, with the minimum being two years. The teachers share common work goals, spend daily time together, and teach a mutual group of students, promoting the friendship characteristic in all of their relationships, some stronger than others. Respondents from the inclusion focus group are going outside this concentration of strong ties to create weak ties in different educational arenas. These weak ties have become the avenues, bridging new ideas to these teachers.

Sociogram Data. Emotional intensity involves the different emotions among members of a relationship and is a characteristic needed to form a tie, or a relationship. (Granovetter, 1973) The emotional intensity of relationships at Riley Elementary was determined by the length and description of the respondents’ relationships. The social networks of strong and weak ties and the association between these ties and the respondents’ perceptions, knowledge, and actions regarding special education were examined (see Figure 3, Appendix E).

In determining the intensity in a relationship, respondents were asked to list their closest friends, and the more distant people, or acquaintances, from whom they gain new ideas, with respondents and or other outside people. Identified ties, weak or strong, were classified as (friend, acquaintance, or professional) and depicted in a sociogram (Figure 3, Appendix E) illustrating the network of these respondents.

Riley's close-knit network, promotes the development of strong ties across respondents. All relationships between respondents were classified as "friends," promoting the development of strong ties. No one identified another respondent as an "acquaintance." Respondent H classified all respondents as friends and stated "this is very hard because I am friends with all of them" (1-10-02).

Weak tie development had occurred with some respondents. Respondents A and B (principal and counselor) and inclusion teacher Respondents D-E-F-G identified weak ties, described as professional, outside Riley Elementary. These outside people included conference instructors and participants, college professors, other principals, ITI Model teachers, and National Board Certified teachers. Respondent I is the only teacher from the pull-out focus group who identified weak tie development with other influences. Respondent I identified instructors from the ITI Model and a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade Riley teacher. Respondent I identified inclusion Respondent E and #3, another 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher, as those whom she shares information.

Primarily the Riley Elementary strong ties are evident between the pull-out group respondents where the inclusion group respondents had these strong ties, but additionally had developed weak tie development with outside educators, promoting the dissemination of new knowledge. Distant relationships are proficient in sharing knowledge because they

offer access to new information by bridging otherwise detached individuals and groups within an organization (Hansen, 1999).

Respondents in the pull-out focus group (H-J-K) have primarily developed only strong ties across Riley Elementary, thereby promoting the perpetuation of the same practices and student placement choices for learning disabled students. Strong ties are likely to produce “redundant information” because they tend to occur in small groups, like Riley Elementary, where everyone knows what everyone else knows (Hansen, 1999).

Strong ties involve larger time commitments and similar philosophies (Granovetter, 1973) which is evident between the pull-out focus group and inclusion focus group teachers. Each of these respondents spend a lot of time together through similar school activities. Respondents across the pull-out group and focus group share teaching philosophies with other respondents from their same group. Respondents do not share the exact teaching philosophy because of their evolving philosophy, promoted through growth in varying areas or stagnation of growth and their teaching beliefs. Similar philosophies are evident between Respondents A and B with other principals and counselors because these people spend a significant amount of time together and share common experiences.

Respondents C and K, teachers of the learning disabled, identified a strong relationship with Respondent B, the counselor, because of the common work focus held between Respondents B, C, and K. Respondent B is responsible for the accuracy of special education documents at Riley Elementary. The relationship between C, K and B seems to have formed out of an obligation to fulfill the mandates of special education. Gary Coombs describes the two elements of social networks:

(1) people are in some sense “linked” or “joined” by ties of affect, trust, right, obligation or expectation; (2) these social ties exert an influence on the behavior and cognition of the participants. (1973, p. 96)

Respondent K identifies Respondent B as a direct source of information regarding her expectations as a special education teacher. This respondent identified no other strong or weak ties. Respondent K’s lack of tie development with other educators limits the diffusion of information reaching her and disseminating to others. “Individuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial new and views of their close friends” (Granovetter, 1983, p. 202).

Co-teaching Respondents C-G spend every day together, creating a strong emotional intensity due to their shared experiences, classroom strategies, family information, and other reciprocated ideas, creating a strong tie. New ideas are generated through weak ties developed with Respondent G and her college professors and conference presenters and filter to this classroom for the benefit of their students.

The notion of strong ties is evident through the interaction of people in this school because they share the same knowledge, beliefs, and interests, creating a strong emotional intensity between the members of these relationships. The stronger the tie between people, the more alike they are going to be (Granovetter, 1973).

Strong ties, represented through shared philosophies, often create a comfort zone, which could potentially build barriers blocking innovation. “Closely linked peers in an interlocking network seldom exert their potential influence because this type of



homophilous, high-proximity personal network is seldom activated by information about an innovation” (Rogers, 1995, p. 311).

### Time

Frequency of contact and duration of time supports the strength of interpersonal ties. Granovetter (1973) uses the following categories to measure the time factor: “often=at least twice a week; occasionally=more than once a year but less than twice a week; rarely=once a year or less” (p. 1371). These categories describing frequency of time did not fit the data collection needs for this study because of the proximity of teachers and common work goals promoting a daily to minimum once a week contact between all Riley respondents. Since the respondents hold a strong relationship with one another, the meaning of time must be held in perspective because there is an expectation of daily interaction with one another.

Respondent A, the principal, reported: “I think it is important for me to have contact with my teachers every day” (1/8/02). Pull-out Respondent I shared that she had more frequent contact with certain teachers on her grade level team, but that the duration of contact was often limited by their different schedules and short lunch time.

The element of time seemed most applicable regarding the time spent with the teachers of the learning disabled, Respondents C and K. Frequency of contact with the special education teachers was described much more infrequently, which has affected the transference of special education knowledge: “I hardly ever see them. Sometimes they don’t even get to come to faculty meetings because they are involved in so many IEPs” (pull-out group, J, 12/5/01); “It is really unfortunate that we have all of this untapped

knowledge at school which would help our special education students, but we don't get the opportunity to tap into it" (inclusion group, C, 12/5/01).

Respondents C and K also, indicated that they had limited contact with the other respondents: "We see each other at IEP meetings or passing in the hall, but unfortunately, we don't really get to talk, we just literally see each other" (Respondent C, 12/4/01). Respondent C clarified that she did see inclusion Respondent G everyday because of their co-teaching situation, but this situation actually limited the amount of time she saw other teachers because they (Respondents C & G) stayed in their room most of the time planning for their students.

Time spent together between regular and special education teachers was explained as directly impacting the perceptions and philosophies of the respondents, which ultimately directed the learning for Riley's learning disabled students: "Styles develop from experience and the people we work most closely" (pull-out, I, 12/5/01); "The year has brought full change in my beliefs. I use to support a pull-out placement option for all learning disabled students, but now, after working with Respondent G, I have changed full circle" (inclusion, C, 12/4/01). It appeared a priority to optimize time development between special and regular education.

### Intimacy

The intimacy, or "mutual confiding," encompasses philosophical issues, goals, and trust between the people in a relationship (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361). Questions regarding intimacy generated discussion focusing on the likenesses or differences in philosophies and various degrees of trust and common goals between respondents. To

determine the intimacy of relationships, respondents were asked who they felt most closely shared their teaching philosophy. Respondents in the inclusion focus group found commonalities in their teaching philosophies, and respondents within the pull-out focus group shared a similar teaching philosophy with the other respondents in their group. I believe the discussion of intimacy was agreed upon within the groups because of the purposeful, homogenous grouping style used to formulate these groups.

The inclusion and pull-out groups' discussions revealed different perspectives of intimacy in their relationships. Inclusion group respondents shared ideas about how they were currently serving learning disabled students whereas the pull-out focus group discussed problems experienced by the presence of the learning disabled students in their classrooms. No new knowledge from special education legal mandates seems to be permeating the classrooms of the teachers solely incorporating pull-out placement strategies for learning disabled students, creating frustration and problems within these classes. Teachers practicing inclusion placement strategies have indulged new knowledge in varying arenas, and now brainstorm together to identify and implement the best placement strategy for each student.

Sociogram Data. The shared philosophy network sociogram depicts the intimacy tie characteristic, as outlined by Granovetter (1973). Intimacy in a relationship promotes a mutual sharing of philosophies, goals, and trust. During the individual interview sessions, each respondent was asked to name the teachers with whom they share the same teaching philosophy. This information was then used to formulate the first sociogram for this study (see Figure 1, Appendix E). A summary of this data follows.

Inclusion Respondent D identified Inclusion Respondent F, #1 (3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher), and # 3 (1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher) as sharing the same teaching philosophy. Reciprocity was also evident between these inclusion focus group respondents: C-G, C-F, G-F, E-G, E-I, and F-D. Inclusion respondents C and G, and pull-out Respondent I are on the same teaching team, but there is no evidence of similar philosophies between I with C nor G. C and G share teaching philosophies, which evolved through their co-teaching experience. Respondent D and F, inclusion respondents, described a common philosophy: “F and myself are both very Piaget, constructionist oriented in our styles” (D, 2/13/02). Respondents E (inclusion) and I (pull-out) actively attend ITI professional development opportunities and together, write curriculum supporting the ITI concept. These experiences explain their developed, relational reciprocity.

Respondent H, 5<sup>th</sup> grade pull-out teacher, viewed a shared philosophy with Respondent E, 5<sup>th</sup> grade inclusion teacher, but E did not reciprocate. These respondents are on the same grade level team, so have proximity and contact frequency. Respondent E explains their lack of reciprocity:

Personally, I think she is a wonderful person and you can't help but like her. But then you kind of take on the attitude of, professionally I can't change her because she stays in her room and just does her own thing. (E, 12/4/01)

Three islands of isolation emerged through the responses of Respondent J (2<sup>nd</sup> grade pull-out teacher), K (pull-out special education teacher), and B (school counselor). Proximity, common students, and contact frequency support the reciprocity between Respondents J and #2, two second grade teachers. Reciprocity between Respondents K

and #4 exists because they both service special education students; therefore they share similar professional experiences including: instructional methodology, professional development needs, and special education requirements. Respondent B, school counselor, only listed other counselors as sharing in his philosophy. Rogers (1995) offers a possible explanation for these respondents' isolation:

Individuals form network links that require the least effort and that are most rewarding. Both spatial and social proximity can be indicators of least effort. Communication network links with neighboring and homophilous partners are relatively easy and require little effort. (p. 311)

These respondents chose people with whom they share close relationships, thus requiring little effort to develop because proximity and the commonality of their professional positions. Respondents B, H, J, nor K were chosen by any of the study's respondents as sharing the same teaching philosophy, thus leaving them isolated or relationally and philosophically disconnected from the other teachers at Riley Elementary.

Respondent A listed #5 (other principals), raising an assumption that other principals would reciprocate a shared philosophy with Riley's principal, their all holding similar positions. However, information regarding this reciprocity was not collected for this study. Respondent A, school principal, also listed Respondent I, pull-out 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, but without evidence of any reciprocity. When asked why Respondent A listed only one of her teachers, she explained: "Respondent I basis her classroom on the ITI Model and I truly believe this is how all teachers should teach. I am trying to get more teachers on board with this. I think we are coming along" (1/8/02).

Neither A nor B hold a shared philosophy with a special education teacher or district special education director. The lack of relational ties between the administration and special education has restricted the transfer of new special education knowledge to other teachers. According to Respondent L, the school administration is identified as the district's choice to disseminate this information: "It becomes the principals' jobs to get the information to the teachers" (L, 2-27-02).

Focus group interview data revealed that Respondents H, I, and J, pull-out focus group respondents, exhibited little knowledge regarding the special education legal mandates and the available placement options promoting the least restrictive environment for special education students. Respondent K, special education teacher in pull-out focus group, held information about special education legal mandates, but focused more on the legal aspects rather than practice:

People are more worried about having the paper work done correctly, so believe me, I dot every "i" and cross every "t." I am not sure I agree with all the frill they are adding. These kids have deficits in their learning, so should be remediated. I think that is best done in a pull-out classroom setting. (12/5/01)

When asked when and where she had obtained her knowledge about special education, she replied:

It has been so long ago, I am not sure. I think it was probably in one of my college classes, but since I have taught 11 years, I have lost track. I went to a workshop recently, but it talked more about the legalities of it all.

You know, I think that is the focus, so that is what I take care of.

(12/5/01)

This lack of new knowledge has directly impacted the current placement options and instructional strategy decisions for Respondent K's learning disabled students. She has supported pull-out placement strategies, regardless of the student's needs. This lack of knowledge created another challenge since Respondent K is identified as a main source of special education information (see Figure 2, Appendix E). Unfortunately, she is conveying her perspective of special education placement based on old knowledge to other teachers at Riley Elementary. In fact, the message conveyed supports and perpetuates the status quo of traditional practices, directly impacting many learning disabled students within this school.

Inclusion Respondents A, C, D,E, F, and G have developed weak ties which have promoted the obtainment of new knowledge and an evolving teaching philosophy exhibiting new ideas. When asked to describe the content of this new knowledge Respondent G was the only one who had obtained information regarding special education legal mandates and new strategies and placement options for learning disabled students. She had obtained this information: "From my recent graduate classes and some workshops I chose to go during our yearly teacher conference. I also learn ideas from Respondent C since we are together so much." (G, 12/4/01)

Respondent C shared that her current co-teaching experience has changed the way she thinks about special education: "I used to support a pull-out placement option for all learning disabled students, but now, after working with Respondent G, I have changed full circle" (C, 12/4/01).

When asked what makes a special education program successful and what promotes change in this arena, Respondent A, the principal, states:

I truly believe that the way we service learning disabled students has evolved over time. from just pulling them out for all skills to including them all the way. I have learned a lot from the current inclusion practices and believe this is truly the least restrictive environment for most of these students. (A, 1/8/02)

The shared philosophy network (see Figure 1, Appendix E) offered valuable information regarding the sources and avenues for change or lack of change in knowledge, perception, and actions needed to optimize instruction for learning disabled students. Special education legal mandates and placement options information is not reaching most teachers at Riley Elementary, explaining the use of continued pull-out placement choices. This new knowledge has been obtained by an inclusion teacher and her teaching philosophy has evolved to include implementation of inclusive placement options for her fourth grade learning disabled students. This special education knowledge has not been prioritize by the Riley administration or other Riley teachers, promoting very slow or lack of change within this educational arena. The data conveys an expressed trust, common goals, and a mutual expression of philosophical issues at Riley Elementary, especially across the respondents within the like focus groups, pull-out and inclusion. These characteristics are needed elements of intimacy within a tie or relationship (Granovetter, 1973).



## Chapter Summary

Analysis of statements made during focus group and individual interviews describe Riley Elementary as a strong, social network, with the pull-out focus group respondents maintaining strong ties and the inclusion focus group respondents maintaining strong ties within Riley Elementary, but reaching outside this network to also develop weak ties between college professors, conference presenters, conference participants, past administrators, and teachers. These relational ties, strong and weak, influence the types of classroom decisions made by each respondent, which ultimately represents change or status quo.

The pull-out focus group participants are willing to share ideas with other Riley teachers, but they do not show a willingness to accept these ideas and implement them into their classrooms. Any new information presented to the pull-out focus group respondents is obtained through other Riley teachers where new information obtained through the inclusion focus group respondents is obtained from outside sources including, college professors, conference participants, past administrators, and other teachers. This new information is received through the development of weak ties. The content of new information permeating the classrooms through the inclusion focus group teachers contains little information regarding special education placement options and instructional strategies for learning disabled students. The new information received from the weak tie development focuses on Riley Elementary's new professional development focus: National Board Certification or ITI. The inclusion co-teachers, C and

G, appear to be the only ones directly seeking new information for the benefit of learning disabled students.

In summarizing the influence of education and teaching experience as factors in the development of ties between the respondents of the study, there was no evidence that educational level or number of years taught were significant factors. Analysis of the data indicate similarities between the respondents' educational level and total years teaching, but these similarities offered no patterns regarding the development of ties and the formation of the perceptions, knowledge, and activities affecting learning disabled students

Network Analysis offered invaluable information about the interaction of individuals within this school network. Wasserman and Galaskiewicz (1994) share the benefits and strategies of Network Analysis:

Instead of analyzing individual behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs, social network analysis focuses its attention on social entities or actors in interaction with one another and on how these interactions constitute a framework or structure that can be studied and analyzed in its own right.

(p. xii)

The information obtained through Network Analysis illustrated the tie development depicting the shared philosophy, sources of gained knowledge, and strong and weak tie development. The Respondents with strong tie development supported and perpetuate the status quo of special education strategies. Respondents' weak tie development is building bridges for the dissemination of new knowledge, but not necessarily to an overall benefit for learning disabled students. Unfortunately, little new

information regarding special education has become available to the teachers at Riley Elementary, except through a small interaction of Respondents, C-G. Currently implemented placement options for Respondents C and G's learning disabled students is the only classroom implementing new knowledge, changed perceptions, and activities to obtain the optimal least restrictive environment for each of these learning disabled student.

Inclusion Respondent F and pull-out Respondent K began school in a similar co-teaching situation as Respondents C and G. Respondent K was not comfortable with this new situation, so has returned to pull-out placement options for all her learning disabled students. Inclusion Respondent F believes in the benefits of inclusion and would like to continue with inclusion next year, even if it means not working with Respondent K anymore. She explains:

I don't think inclusion is for everyone, but it is probably the least restrictive environment for most learning disabled students, and if we don't offer it, we are certainly going to miss out on someone, putting them a segregated classroom setting for no reason. (12/5/01)

The examination of teachers' ties serves to evaluate the impact of these social networks upon the knowledge of and willingness to accept and implement changes needed to obtain the optimal least restrictive environment for students with learning disabilities. Various research tools were used to add strength to the study. "Perhaps the best way to elicit the various and divergent constructions of reality that exist within the context of a study is to collect information about different events and relationships from different points of view" (Erlandson, et al, 1993, p. 31).

Consistent with the literature review in Chapter II in conjunction with Network Analysis (Granovetter, 1973, 1983) the data presented in Chapter IV revealed that weak tie development with the respondents of the inclusion focus group is bridging new knowledge of varying focuses. Respondents C and G are implementing inclusion in their classroom and are the only respondents seeking special education knowledge. The lack of special education new knowledge in the pull-out focus group is perpetuating the status quo for their learning disabled students. To obtain needed change, the right avenues of knowledge must be identified and the development of weak ties must connect and travel these avenues for the benefit of students.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS,  
IMPLICATIONS, AND COMMENTARY

Students in special education represent a diverse segment within our classrooms. The type of classroom placement options for this diverse segment of students is just that, options or choices made by school administrators and teachers. However, these have not been designed to be free and independent choices. Classroom placement options have been developed and driven by a vast history of legal mandates that have extensively laid out the expectations of educators and the rights of special education students and their families. Mandates or not, decisions from each teacher or school administrator ultimately drive the actual placement decision for these students. Consequently, the choices made often leave learning disabled students in a more restrictive learning environment than needed.

Since the 1970s, a call for change has been expressed through extensive special education mandates, highlighting the least restrictive environment element. Lipsky & Gartner (1997) states

Historically, the assurance written into the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142) that each student with disabilities is entitled to a free appropriate public education was seen as balancing the

requirement that education be provided in the least restrictive environment. (p. 71)

This study proposes weak tie development (Granovetter, 1973; 1983) as the channel for new knowledge, perceptions, and actions to optimize the least restrictive environment for all learning disabled students.

### Summary of the Study

This study was conducted using teachers from Riley Elementary School during the 2001-2002 school year. Teachers in this organization serve regular and special education students from kindergarten to fifth grades. This school site is located in the northeastern section of a midwestern state and was chosen because it served a large population of special education students through various placement options, including pull-out and inclusion models.

### Purpose

Through the lens of Network Analysis (Granovetter's 1973; 1983), the purpose of this study was to examine teachers' ties and the impact of these social networks upon the knowledge of and willingness to accept and implement changes perceived to be needed to satisfy the legal mandates. Control to these mandates is for schools to achieve the optimal "least restrictive environment" for students with learning disabilities. "The law, as the courts have interpreted it, states that both the least restrictive environment and the 'appropriate education' mandates involve the whole child and the full range of

schooling's benefits, academic and social" (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997, p. 207). The following goals of the study were accomplished:

1. Perceptions, knowledge, and actions of teachers and school principals in a school setting used to place and serve learning disabled students were identified and discussed;
2. The school's network was analyzed and data revealed those whom the respondents share instructional knowledge and teaching philosophies;
3. Granovetter's (1973; 1983) network analysis was used to analyze strong and weak ties within this school's network;
4. Assessment of Granovetter's (1973; 1983) framework as a lens used in describing the anomaly presented in this study may be revealed;
5. Other realities were identified and will be discussed;
6. Speculation of the impact the ties will have on the future of this school network.

To accomplish the study's purpose, several data sources and data collection strategies were used to reach out for a full spectrum of perspectives.

#### Data Needs and Sources

Because the primary focus of the study was to identify and describe what perceptions, knowledge, and actions teachers and school principal in this school setting use to place and serve students with learning disabilities, teacher respondents of the study were purposefully chosen by the types of placement options and pedagogical choices used to instruct learning disabled students. The building administration, including the

principal and counselor, and the school district's special education director provided data through individual interviews. These data sources provided useful information regarding the challenges faced by educators when placing and serving learning disabled students in the least restrictive environment. With the data obtained of one individual school, I was better able to focus on the dynamics within a single school setting.

### Data Collection Strategies

Data collection consisted primarily of three methods: focus group interviews, individual interviews, and network analysis. Three different classes of respondents were identified for participation in the study, thus allowing me to obtain different perspectives of this topic. These categories of interviewees included regular education teachers, special education teachers, and site and local school administration. Variety of methodology and respondents brought greater breadth to the study through triangulation (Creswell, 1994).

At the onset of the study, respondents were asked to consent to their participation in the study (see Appendix B). All the teacher respondents were brought together in a focus group interview session and then each respondent participated in at least one follow-up individual interview session. Prior to each individual interview, the respondent was asked to participate in a member checking process where each respondent was given a copy of their focus group transcript with identified, emerging themes written in the margin of the transcripts. Respondents were asked to read the transcripts and the initial analysis of the transcripts for accuracy. Respondents E, F, I, and G did not participate in the member checking process. They each told me that they trusted me and did not need to



read it. Respondents A, B, C, D, H, J, and K read their transcripts and agreed with the themes that emerged.

General questions for the focus group interview sessions were formulated to allow an informal dialogue to obtain information for analysis based on Granovetter's (1973) tie characteristics: reciprocity, intimacy, time, and intensity (see Appendix C). More specific questions were proposed in the individual interviews (see Appendix D). All interviews of Riley Elementary respondents were conducted in person, recorded, transcribed, and organized to allow for consistent analysis of the data provided. The interview of the district's special education administrator was conducted through the district's e-mail system. An initial question was proposed at the onset of this interview regarding the types of placement options available for learning disabled students in this school district. Dialogue was recorded through a series of e-mail messages.

#### Data Organization and Interpretation

For increased clarity, demographic information collected from respondents was formulated into a table allowing for organized analysis. Data concerning educational experience and numbers of years teaching at Riley and career teaching are represented in Table 1, page 63. Additionally, data collected from the focus group and individual interviews is illustrated by three sociograms, representing networks that directly impact the changes in knowledge, perceptions, and actions lending support or lack of support for the obtainment towards an optimal least-restrictive environment for learning disabled students. Information from the interviews, guided by the proposed research questions, are visually depicted through these sociograms: shared knowledge (see Figure 1, Appendix

E), gaining information (see Figure 2, Appendix E) and strength of ties (see Figure 3, Appendix E).

### Data Analysis

Data from the focus groups and individual interviews were analyzed for content and patterns or themes describing school relationships and tie characteristics then cast against Granovetter's Network Analysis framework to analyze the strength of ties among the members of this school faculty in relation to their perceptions, knowledge, and actions within the special education arena. An examination of these relations was used to develop network maps, or sociograms, illustrating shared philosophies, those whom the respondents gain information, and the presence of weak and strong ties within this school's network.

### Summary of the Findings

From the data collected for this study, important and revealing findings can be drawn and perhaps applied in the future for the further advancement of an educational program that might better serve our learning disabled population. One of the most important findings is that educational placement and instructional accommodations for the learning disabled does not appear to be firmly directed by the specifications of the legal mandates issued by Congress as applied by the courts. An important question might be "Why?" Why do schools fail to fully embrace the mandates that require students with disabilities to receive an education with their personal level of least restrictive environment considered and respected?

The findings from the study will be preserved and further addressed through the following:

1. A description of the ties (Granovetter, 1973) that exist among the members of Riley Elementary;
2. The usefulness of Network Analysis (Granovetter, 1973, 1983) in identifying and describing these ties;
3. A speculation about the impact these ties will have on the future of special education student placement; and,
4. Identification of areas for further study.

#### Description of Ties

Granovetter's (1973) strength of ties framework was extremely useful in describing ties within Riley Elementary. Collected data was organized and analyzed against the four characteristics of a tie: reciprocity, emotional intensity, time, and intimacy. Through this analysis, I was able to examine the social networks of strong and weak ties at Riley Elementary and identified the impact these relationships have on new perceptions, knowledge, and actions regarding, specifically, the placement and service options for learning disabled students.

In general, the data revealed strong ties exist between all respondents of this organization with each of the four tie characteristics present in varying degrees. Some respondents were afforded and accepted the opportunities to create weak tie development with outside educators, bringing in new knowledge which positively affected the

perceptions and actions of these respondents. This should tell us that the effectiveness of legal mandates requires communication.

Communication brings new knowledge, but the content of new knowledge directs the type of changes that will be implemented in the classrooms. For instance, respondents involved in this study who created weak ties with new special education knowledge made creative changes in their education arena. Likewise, respondents who developed weak ties in other knowledge areas tended to make changes in those areas. On the other hand, those respondents who held only strong ties with other members of Riley Elementary tended to perpetuate old ways of thinking and lacked changes in their knowledge, perceptions, and actions in their classrooms, specifically a lack of change in placement and teaching accommodations decisions for their learning disabled students. Thus, it becomes clearer that if there is to be change, there must be increased external communication.

Each tie characteristic (Granovetter, 1973) was described and perceived as important by each respondent in the study. Themes of reciprocity, evolving from the data, dealt with advice and direction including mutual sharing, compromise, teacher/administrative support, and trust. Though reciprocity was discussed in detail by respondents in the focus group interviews, respondents did not always perceive reciprocation with each other regarding shared philosophies and/or sources of gaining instructional ideas (see Figures 1 & 2, Appendix E).

Emotional intensity was consistently considered in high regards by each respondent. Though the respondents knew each other for varying lengths of time, two to 10 years, respondents described their relationships as friendship. These strong tie

relationships are concentrated at Riley Elementary because they share common work goals, spend daily time together, and teach a mutual group of students. Nevertheless, it is within this close community that the legal mandates must be introduced and accepted.

Of the four tie characteristics, time seemed to have the least impact upon the identification of a tie. Due to the size of the Riley community, a minimum weekly contact was made with all respondents. Through the focus group and individual interviews, all respondents shared they had frequent contact with one another. Understandably, respondents serving on grade level teams spent more time together than other respondents, but this did not seem to show much relevance when describing the lack of change towards fulfilling the special education legal mandates. However, the data did reveal the lack of time or lack of communication with Riley's special education teachers surfaced as a problem and material obstacle in obtaining special education information.

Varying degrees of intimacy, especially regarding philosophical issues, appeared through the examination of ties. Different perceptions regarding special education placement strategies and learning accommodations were most evident as revealed through the homogenous focus groups. Information obtained through follow-up interviews confirmed these different philosophies and revealed the weak ties' influences in the evolving philosophy of the inclusion respondents. Formations of varying weak ties bridged different types of new knowledge to each respondent, which became the driving force for the type of changes in perceptions and actions of these educators. Weak ties, communicating new special education knowledge, were obtained by respondents in the inclusion group. Primarily strong tie development was evident among the members of

the pull-out focus group. Some weak ties were developed, but none with anyone who could bridge new special education knowledge through this tie.

Respondent L, the district's special education director, is one of the primary sources of special education requirements for all schools within this district. Yet, all relational tie characteristics were lacking between this individual and the respondents at the Riley site. The lack of tie development with Respondent L did appear to be relevant in explaining the perpetuation of traditional placement strategies for learning disabled students at this school site.

Granovetter's (1973) definition of a tie, specifically the four characteristics, was useful in describing the ties that exist among educators at Riley Elementary. A conclusion may be made that by using this framework, an organized method of exploration and analysis can be used to assist in the determination and explanation of ties within an organization.

### Network Analysis

Network Analysis (Granovetter, 1973, 1983) can be considered the more global and useful technique for collecting and analyzing data regarding the identification and description of ties, or relationships, which exist among the members of Riley Elementary. The collected data was easily organized and analyzed under the four tie characteristics (reciprocity, intimacy, intensity, and time) categories. Riley's network and the tie characteristics came to life through the development of three sociograms. Intimacy of the respondent's relationships is displayed in the shared philosophy network sociogram (see Figure 1, Appendix E), reciprocity appeared in the gaining instructional information

sociogram (see Figure 2, Appendix E), and the strong and weak tie network sociogram (see Figure 3, Appendix E) depicted the emotional intensity among the members at Riley. Data collected from the focus groups and individual interviews was used to formulate these sociograms, which provided a framework and workable direction for the study. Change in knowledge, perceptions, and actions is driven by the tie development as described by Granovetter (1973, 1983). Without weak tie development, stagnation in knowledge, perceptions, and actions is present and drives the equally stagnated practices in the classroom. Strong theoretical changes have occurred in the special education arena through legal mandates, although changes in the classroom setting continue to slowly grow.

Knowledge, experience, and communication become the driving force of new perceptions and actions and thereby becoming the crux of initiating change. Lack of change in special education practices must be associated with the lack of effective communication of the new knowledge of these practices. The most notable finding in regard to knowledge obtainment is the identification of the outside weak ties developed and the type of knowledge available across this tie. Though weak ties can promote change, they can only promote changes in areas in which they hold knowledge. Little weak tie development with sources of new special education knowledge has occurred, thus explaining the perpetuation of traditional placement options for learning disabled students.

### Future of the Organization

Findings in this study shout out the need for effective communication of knowledge regarding special education requirements and expectations if such requirements are expected to permeate the classrooms. Analysis of the collected data showed a direct correlation between the changes occurring within Riley school site and the type of knowledge reaching each participant. For a large segment at Riley, very limited weak tie development with sources of special education knowledge regarding placement options and accommodations had been accomplished; consequently, implementation of the legal mandates for special education has stagnated.

Throughout the literature reviewed, varying perspectives and debates regarding the best special education practices have been presented. These perspectives and arguments were all ventilated before Congress, which resulted in explicitly written legal mandates outlining educators' obligations to special education students.

Based on data collected in this study, many inconsistencies become apparent between theory and the reality of practice in the classrooms. However, debate about the wisdom of providing equal treatment to all students without regard to race, sex, origin, religion, or disability has not ended. Now, faced with the legal mandates, the only question for debate is implementation, which requires information through communication. Until this information reaches Riley Elementary in a more persuasive way, stagnated perceptions and actions concerning our learning disabled students will persist.



### Areas for Further Study

In this study, data revealed types of currently used placement and pedagogical choices implemented for learning disabled students and provided other emerging themes which might explain the lack of material change in special education knowledge, perceptions, and actions among the teachers at Riley Elementary. Weak tie development bridges change, but the type of change is driven by the content of knowledge reaching the schools. Also, once knowledge reaches a teacher, there must be an acceptance of this knowledge to promote new actions. Respondents throughout this study revealed they were willing to receive new knowledge through weak ties, but were not necessarily going to implement the new knowledge into classroom practices.

Respondents shared the importance of school leadership. The principal at Riley Elementary has promoted certain professional development opportunities and has mandated the acceptance of the ITI Model of instruction. However, new special education knowledge and strategies have been minimally promoted to teachers. The principal gives teachers freedom to choose which type of placement options and pedagogical strategies to use in their classrooms. Though this freedom is viewed as “respect” and “trust” by many of the respondents, lack of change in special education may be occurring as a result of this freedom. Fullan (1991) states “As long as we have schools and principals, if the principal does not lead changes in the culture of the school, or if he or she leaves it to others, it normally will not get done” (p. 169).

Through the literature review in Chapter II, it becomes apparent that extensive time, effort, and money were in place developing theory represented through the legal

mandates. However, the data also indicates that little to no time, effort, nor money has been firmly focused on the promotion of changes in practice. Understandably then, change is going to be lacking or at least slowly progressing in our public schools. It appears, through this study that schools currently are continuing with the most restrictive placement options for learning disabled students. Mandated least restrictive environments are seen as extras, requiring money and more special education teachers to implement.

### Conclusions

Data from this study should impact theory, add to knowledge base through research, and influence practice. The following will examine how this study met each of these criteria.

#### Theory

Granovetter's (1973, 1983) Network Analysis proved useful in identifying and describing "ties" weak or strong, and their four characteristics: reciprocity, emotional intensity, intimacy, and time (Granovetter, 1973) in varying degree. Of these four characteristics, time was the least important characteristic of the ties in this organization possibly because a minimum of weekly contact is made with each member of this network.

Using tie characteristics as a guide to identify and analyze the commonalities and differences in relationships is very informative. This lens serves useful in explaining tie

development, specifically weak ties, as the sources of change in knowledge, perceptions, and actions and in transferring new learning and knowledge throughout an organization.

### Research

The history of special education legal mandates, as discussed in the literature, should draw attention to the need for further research, identifying areas needing change in order to fulfill our requirements, as educators, outlined by Congress and the courts. According to Wasserman and Faust (1994) network analysis is an important element of research methodology:

Network methodology arose as social scientists in a range of disciplines struggled to make sense of empirical data and grappled with theoretical issues. Therefore, network analysis, rather than being an unrelated collection of methods, is grounded in important social phenomena and theoretical concepts. (p. 11)

Research using Network Analysis has been primarily based upon ties between individuals. Sociograms are spatial representations which have been used to illustrate structures of influence in between various individuals and can be used for illustration of relationships between larger groups. (Wasserman & Faust, 1994) The themes emerging from the data became very evident through the presentation of these sociograms.

Network analysis lends itself to support data collection efforts in qualitative, as well as quantitative studies.

## Practice

School networks can impact change needed to make the optimal least restrictive environment a reality for each learning disabled student. Teachers hold the responsibility for obtaining tools and knowledge to teach the increased diversity within their classrooms. Inclusion techniques are extensively discussed in the literature, but minimally implemented in the schools. Continued analysis of school networks could impact the success of change needed to bring about acceptance of inclusion and its tenets as a viable option in all school programs. Winzer and Mazurek (2000) discuss the mandated, least restrictive environment (LRE) and the challenges faced by educators to implement this option:

The strengthened mandate for LRE, coming from the judiciary and from the slightly greater acknowledgment within federal policy, will certainly increase the need for more collaboration between special and regular teachers. However, more significant are the provisions that call for the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education curriculum and assessments. (p. 57)

Substantial changes in practice are needed to meet the individual needs of each learning disabled student in their least restrictive environment.

The art of facilitating inclusion involves working creatively with this state of heightened awareness to redirect the energy bound up in fear toward problem solving that promotes reconsideration of boundaries,

relationships, structures, and benefits. (Stainback & Stainback, 1996, pp. 29-30)

Networks serve as the means to accomplish these challenging changes through weak ties or represent the lack of change through strong tie development (Granovetter, 1973, 1983).

The types of ties developed between members of a school drive the content of new knowledge and the change or lack of change affecting students.

Professional development opportunities can be presented to assist in the dissemination of information obtained through this study. These opportunities will afford increased knowledge of special education legal mandates and the impact of Granovetter's (1973, 1983) tie development to offer change and or explain the lack of change in areas of placement and instructional accommodations for learning disabled students.

### Implications and Recommendations

Based upon what has been indicated from the data collected as analyzed through Granovetter's (1973, 1983) concept of strong and weak ties, progress towards material implementation of the Congressional mandates for learning disabled students seems to require special focus by our educational leaders at all levels. It would be very challenging for an individual teacher to be expected to carry the burden of this change on their shoulders alone. To make the mandates effective, teachers will require educational preparation from their university academic training, further educational mandate information from Congress, the courts, and the relevant federal agencies, and all the resources necessary to implement these mandates.

### University Academic Training

Because an increased number of learning disabled students are being identified, the likelihood of a new teacher faced with teaching a learning disabled student has also increased. At the college level, more instructional time needs to be devoted outlining the evolving Congressional mandates and placement and instructional strategies which can be used by teachers to fulfill these mandated requirements. Since career teachers are not actively pursuing all individual options to secure the optimal fulfillment of the mandates for learning disabled students, limited classrooms are available for student observation. Teacher education may create the avenues of knowledge, through the higher education students, to break the cycle of status quo and bridge innovation to public schools. As these teachers are hired into the schools, ties can develop and transference of this new knowledge can take place.

### Continuing Information

New rules and regulations from the federal agencies charged with the responsibilities of enforcement of Congressional mandates for disabled students issues comprehensive rules and regulations. Considering the nature and complexity of these statutes, rules, and regulations, it is unrealistic to impose on an individual teacher the obligation to read and understand the mandates involved. Nonetheless, teachers must be made to understand the changes if they are expected to assume the responsibilities of implementation.

Once the educational system accepts the reality of the mandates for special education, there must be a corresponding commitment of meaningful and effective information communicated to the teachers who directly services the learning disabled students. A conscious effort of recruiting teachers with this knowledge would be beneficial in developing weak ties needed to bridge new special education knowledge to other teachers. Principals' interview processes of new teachers could include questions about the level of special education knowledge and the willingness to change instructional strategies and placement decisions to meet the needs of learning disabled students.

### Resources

Legal mandates are brought to the schools without the necessary resources for implementation. Without these resources, these mandates are minimally implemented or ignored. The data conveyed a frustration from the administration due to the lack of resources to implement the ideal mandates, especially for a school site with a large number of learning disabled students. Congress and the courts develop the theory, but without actually walking through the steps of implementation, the amount of needed resources can not be predicted, especially when schools have varying numbers of these students.

Network Analysis (Granovetter 1973, 1983) was useful in identifying and describing strong and weak ties existing within Riley Elementary School's network. Granovetter's (1973) four characteristics of a tie: reciprocity, intimacy, emotional intensity, and time were useful in looking at relationships and the impact these

relationships have on change, specifically change affecting learning disabled students. Using the tie characteristics, relationships can be identified and examined, explaining the reasons for change or lack of change in pedagogy and placement options for learning disabled students.

### Commentary

When I began this study, I focused my interests on gifted education. At the time, I questioned the segregation of students based on the classification as gifted and talented. I believed this segregation deprived students within the schools, especially high poverty schools, of useful educational opportunity to be educated with higher ability students. My intentions were to study why this form of educational segregation occurred. Then, at the beginning of a new school year, I was faced with a unique classroom situation, a class with more learning disabled students than regular education students. Witnessing on a daily basis as my students were pulled from my classroom, I began to observe increased stress and discipline problems. I approached my principal and requested that I could attempt inclusion, co-teaching with the learning disabled teacher.

I applied the literature I had read pertaining to gifted and talented programs and focused my instructional efforts in a similar direction, respecting each student's strength(s) and began teaching them in areas of their interests. Great success occurred as I saw students climb over two grade levels in reading abilities. I realized the continuing segregation problem with gifted and talented students as well as with the learning disabled population. But there was one big difference. Gifted and talented students perceived the segregation as a compliment, an honor. On the other hand, segregation of



learning disabled students was viewed as stigmatizing and damaging. At this point, I realized I needed to change the focus of my research, in hope of finding answers to better the placement choices and instructional direction for all learning disabled students.

Based upon this study, the greatest need that surfaced was the need for communication between district officials and school administration regarding new special education information. Theoretically a hierarchy of information dissemination is in place; however, the dissemination of information does not necessarily mean there is effective communication. Information is but a single element of communication. In practice, the need for communication is not being met. Special education professional development opportunities need to be highlighted and participation encouraged. This is especially true since the learning disability population continues to grow. To keep pace, teachers must likewise continue to grow in this arena, to continue searching and accepting the belief that all children can learn (Pankratz & Petrosko, 2000). I certainly believe that learning disabled children can learn, but the best learning environment is not always in the restrictive placement in which we find them.

The literature suggests that all instructional placement options for learning disabled students are not available in all schools. Since the passage of Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, inclusion and pull-out advocates have emerged, holding specific ideas and expectations about the “right” answers to the challenges associated with the mandates. It becomes problematic when teachers take one side as the “right” answer to all teaching for all students and I do not believe this was the intention of the mandates.

The mandates outline obligations for educators to teach children in their specific least restrictive environment, a decision which must be made with all placement options from the entire continuum considered. It would be much more beneficial if the philosophies held by the inclusion and pull-out advocate groups were generated into a toolbox, with each idea becoming a single tool to be considered when deciding the appropriate strategy to obtain the optimal least restrictive environment for each student.

It is my opinion that as educators, we must expand our horizons to create the most individualized, optimal placement and accommodations to reach the needs of each student. This expansion of knowledge can come through weak tie development, but the acceptance of this new knowledge put into classroom actions is as important as the new knowledge itself. New knowledge can easily sit on a shelf, but new perceptions can drive new, needed actions for optimal instruction and placement decisions for learning disabled students.

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## APPENDIXES



APPENDIX A

OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL  
REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL FORM

Oklahoma State University  
Institutional Review Board

Protocol Expires: 10/2/02

Date: Wednesday, October 03, 2001

IRB Application No ED0226

Proposal Title: SPECIAL EDUCATION AND REGULAR EDUCATION: THE PERPETUATION OF  
SEPARATE WORLDS

Principal  
Investigator(s):

Cassandra Funderburk  
3613 Silver Oak Court  
Tulsa, OK 74107

Adrienne Hyle  
314 Willard Hall  
Stillwater, OK 74078

Reviewed and  
Processed as: Exempt

Approval Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

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Dear PI :

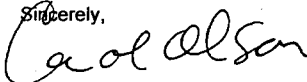
Your IRB application referenced above has been approved for one calendar year. Please make note of the expiration date indicated above. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved projects are subject to monitoring by the IRB. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Sharon Bacher, the Executive Secretary to the IRB, in 203 Whitehurst (phone: 405-744-5700, sbacher@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Carol Olson, Chair  
Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

### Informed Consent of Human Subjects

I, \_\_\_\_\_, authorize Cassandra Funderburk to interview me as part of her research into the impact of social networks on the knowledge of special education student placement. This study will be conducted through Oklahoma State University under the direction of her advisor, Dr. Adrienne Hyle. This is done as part of an investigation entitled "Special Education and Regular Education: The Perpetuation of Separate Worlds."

I understand that:

- My participation is voluntary;
- There is no penalty for refusal to participate;
- I am free to withdraw my consent and participation in the project at any time without penalty;
- My participation in this study will consist of granting an individual interview to Cassandra Funderburk. Typically, these interviews last 45 minutes to one hour, but individuals with greater involvement in the implementation process may be asked to go longer or to consent to additional interviews.
- If I permit it, the interview will be tape recorded.
- My name will not appear on the tape or transcript of the interview.
- I will not be identified by name as an interviewee in any description or report of this research. However, portions of my interview may be presented as quotations;
- If I have a unique perspective or unique access to information about the implementation process, people familiar with the process in my school may be able to connect me with my words. I recognize the need to protect myself from this possibility if I consider it necessary.

For further information or concerns regarding this study, I may contact:

- Cassandra Funderburk at 918-445-9105, 2524 West 53<sup>rd</sup> Street, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74107;
- Dr. Adrienne Hyle at 405-744-9893, Oklahoma State University, 106 Willard Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078; or
- Sharon Bacher at 405-744-5700, IRB Executive Secretary, Oklahoma State University, 203 Whitehurst, Stillwater, OK 74078.

I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

I personally explained all elements of this form to the participant before he/she signed it.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
Cassandra Funderburk

APPENDIX C

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. How do you currently service your special education students? What types of curriculum modifications do you use for these students?
2. How have you obtained information regarding appropriate instructional practices for your special education students?
3. How do you define your role in educating special education students?
4. How do you decide how special education students are served?
5. What curriculum modifications for special education do you see occurring in our school?
6. Is there a choice of placement of special education students?
7. How do you define "inclusion" and what are the benefits and problems that you see with this instructional placement for special education students?
8. What do you feel would makes a special education program successful?
9. Why do you think teachers serve special education students differently?
10. Do you think that teachers that work closely together share the same philosophies? If so, why?
11. What do you think it takes to promote change in a school?
12. How are new ideas brought into a school?
13. Do teachers share ideas with all faculty or just with their closest colleagues?
14. Do you think educators direct change by student need or by teacher style?

APPENDIX D

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What is your highest college degree?
2. How long have you taught at Riley Elementary?
3. How long have you taught in your career?
4. Who do you consider the people you go to for new instructional knowledge?
5. Who do you share the same teaching philosophy?
6. Using the words acquaintance, professional, and friend, how would you describe your relationship with Respondents A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, and K?
7. Other follow questions were asked, specific to each respondent.



APPENDIX E

FIGURES

# Share Teaching Philosophy

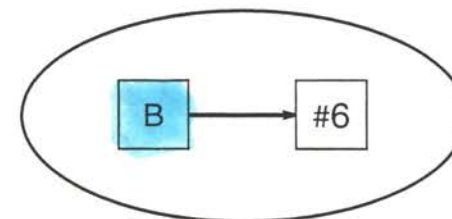
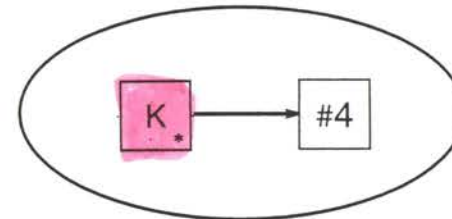
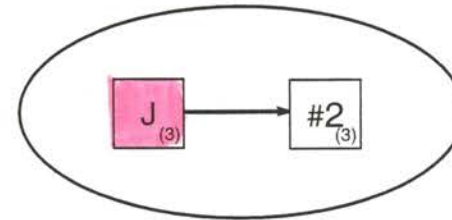
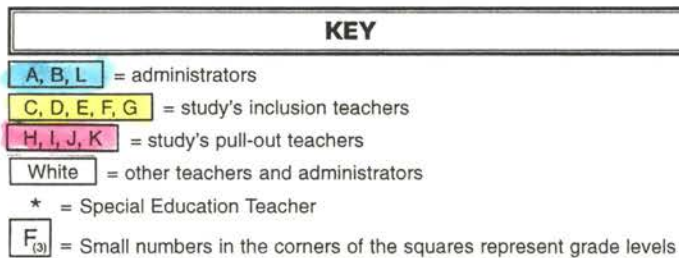
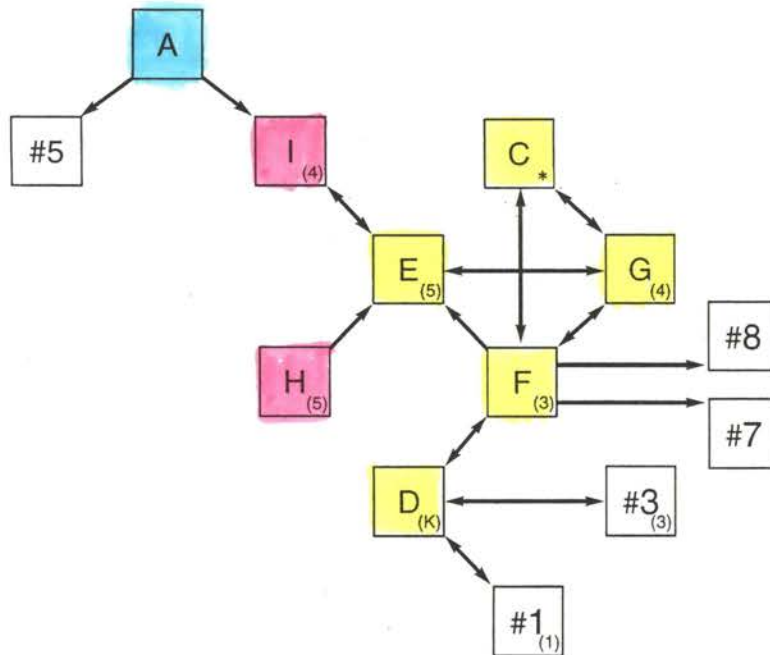
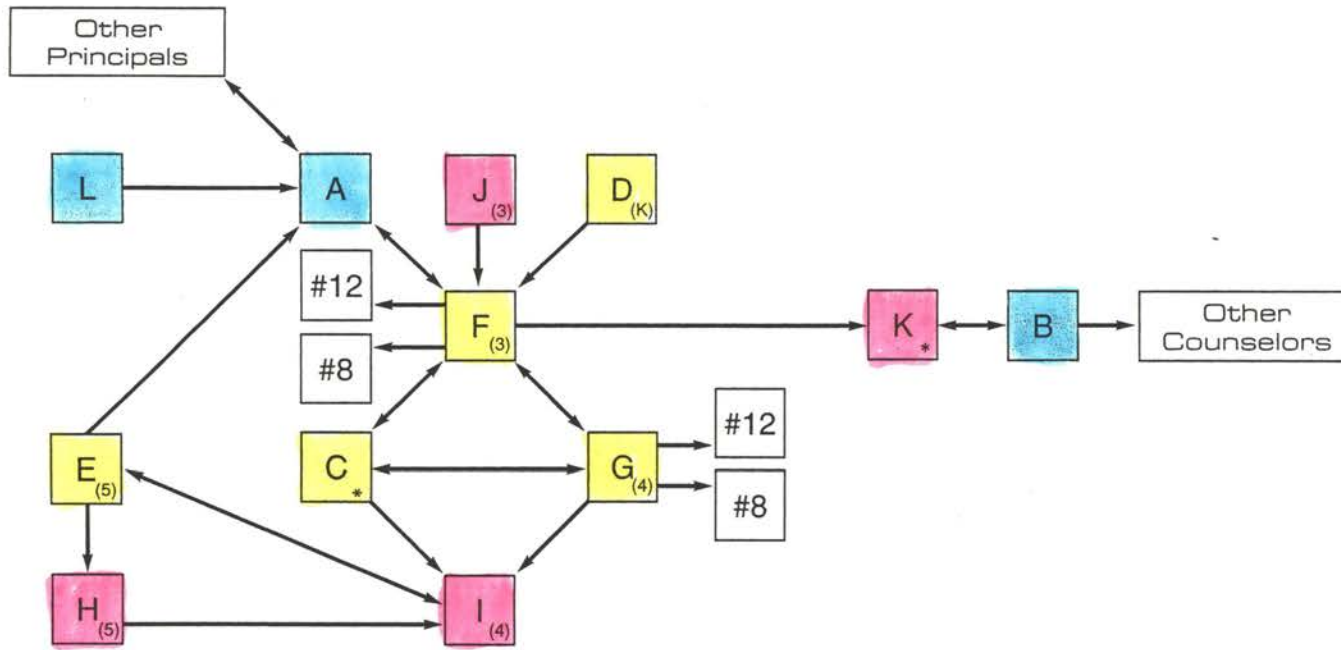


Figure 1

# Gaining Instructional Knowledge



**KEY**

[A, B, L] = administrators  
 [C, D, E, F, G] = study's inclusion teachers  
 [H, I, J, K] = study's pull-out teachers  
 [White] = other teachers and administrators  
 \* = Special Education Teacher  
 [F<sub>(3)</sub>] = Small numbers in the corners of the squares represent grade levels

Figure 2

# Strong and Weak Ties

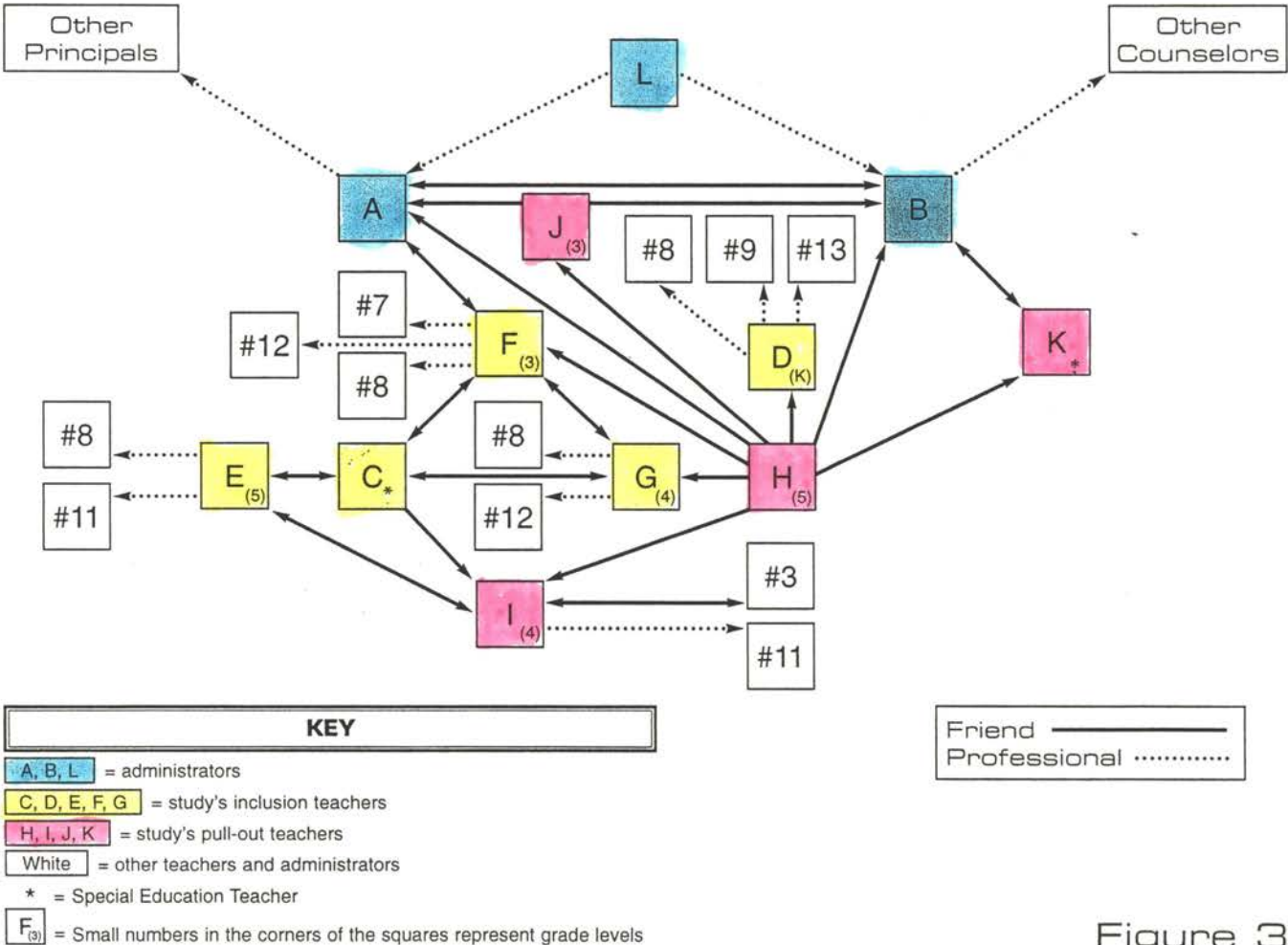


Figure 3

VITA 2

CASSANDRA THOMAS FUNDERBURK

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Thesis: ELEMENTARY SPECIAL AND REGULAR EDUCATION IN SEPARATE  
WORLDS: GRANOVETTER'S STRONG AND WEAK TIES

Major Field: Educational Administration

Biographical

Education: Graduated from Will Rogers High School, Tulsa, Oklahoma in May 1982; received a Bachelor of Science degree in Journalism from Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in December, 1986; received a Master of Arts degree in Elementary Education from University of Tulsa, Tulsa, Oklahoma in August, 1991; completed the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Administration from Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in August, 2002.

Experience: Taught various grades for Tulsa Public Schools, Tulsa, Oklahoma, from 1989 to the present. Other positions held within this position include: Site Instructional Chair, Site Improvement Facilitator, Teacher in Charge, Staff Development Chair; School Enrichment Coordinator; Site-Based Committee Member; Math and Reading Committees Member; Program Evaluator for After School Enrichment Program; Entry-year and Student Teacher Consultant; Educational Grant Writer

Professional Memberships: Tulsa Classroom Teachers Association; Oklahoma Association of Gifted, Creative, and Talented; Oklahoma Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development; Cooperative Council for Oklahoma School Administrators.