

SCHOOLS ATTUNED-OUTCOMES IN THE HOME  
FOR SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS

By

JIMIEANNE JULIA KITE

Bachelor of Science in Education in Elementary Education and Special Education  
Oklahoma Christian University  
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma  
1996

Master of Education in Educational Administration  
University of Oklahoma  
Norman, Oklahoma  
1999

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Graduate College of Oklahoma State University  
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Doctor of Education  
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Dissertation Chair  
Gretchen Schwarz, Ph.D.

---

Committee Member  
Pamela Brown, Ed. D.

---

Committee Member  
Bob Davis, Ph.D.

---

Committee Member  
Laura Barnes, Ph.D.

---

Dean of the Graduate College  
A. Gordon Emslie, Ph.D.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

As a special education teacher I taught children who had various types of learning disabilities and I interacted with their parents on a daily basis. As a night school principal and high school assistant principal I interacted with teachers who taught special education classes, parents of children with learning disabilities, and children who had learning disabilities. As an assistant principal I was also the administrator in charge of the special education department. In my roles of both teacher and administrator, regular classroom teachers and parents would ask my advice about how to help or identify children with learning disabilities. I was involved weekly with IEP (individualized educational program) meetings for children receiving special services due to a learning disability. In these meetings I would frequently listen to and observe parents who didn't know what to do for their child. They didn't know what was going on in the brain of their child and why their child just could not "get it." The number of times parents would ask me "why does my child not act like the other students" was countless.

I can remember the frustration I would feel when I did not have a concrete answer. What I was able to give the parents were standardized test scores and the grade level where their child was functioning.

I could present to them a few activities to pursue at home but rarely had an actual plan of action for the parents. I wanted more for the students and the parents. I wanted to help ease their pain. Even more, I wanted them to see success at home and in school. I wanted to give the parents hope that their child is “okay” and they can do it.

These experiences and questions acted as a catalyst for my research. Listening to parents of children that have learning differences is the tool through which I have gathered my data. Hearing the life stories directly from parents who live with a child who has a learning difference and are engaged in their child’s specific educational needs has been most beneficial to me as an educator. I want to grow in the field of special education and transfer that knowledge to the parents of the children who have a learning difference. As I further my career as a classroom teacher, administrator, or university instructor, the ability to help parents will always be a subject worth pursuing. Problems in special education, the involvement of parents, and the potential of a program called Schools Attuned are the areas that frame my particular research.

## BACKGROUND

Even though special education has made tremendous strides since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 there are still many areas in which problems are arising. Brownell, Hirsch, and Seo (2004) state the following concerning one of the major problems plaguing special education:

Few problems in special education have been as vexing as the chronic undersupply of special education teachers. Annually, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, spends approximately \$90 million to increase the numbers of special education teachers available to serve



our nation's students with disabilities. These funds are in addition to any incentive programs states have to increase the number of teachers in critical shortage areas. Unfortunately, these combined costly efforts have been insufficient to adequately increase the number of qualified teachers in special education, particularly teachers who are culturally and linguistically diverse. (p. 56)

Because of the high number of minorities and non - English speaking students misplaced in special education, it is also important to have special educators of different ethnic backgrounds. This is not only a problem in special education but in general education as well. The most recent data to support this statement is taken from McLeskey, Tyler, and Flippin (2004):

Although 38% of the students with disabilities in the United States are culturally and linguistically diverse, only 14% of those currently teaching is special education and 14% of those in the teacher education pipeline are from historically underrepresented groups. Moreover, some evidence indicates that the number of special education teachers from diverse backgrounds is declining. (p. 8)

It has also become increasingly difficult to recruit teachers into special education because of the pressures of No Child Left Behind and IDEA 2004. With higher academic standards placed upon children with learning disabilities and districts not given specific guidelines of how to do so, it has not at all helped in the recruiting efforts for teachers in special education. Then there is the "highly qualified teacher" law from NCLB. This also complicates recruitment matters for Special Education. Brownell, Hirsch, and Seo (2004) state, "It is highly unlikely to recruit special education teachers with content expertise,

those well-prepared in using research-based practices, or those with expertise in both”(p. 57).

Not only is retaining and recruiting teachers a problem in special education but an over - representation of minority and English Second Language (ESL) students receiving services is also a challenge. There are a number of reasons why students of different racial backgrounds are referred to special education. One of those reasons found in research is the assessments used on students to be placed in special education. These tests tend to be invalid when used on students from other cultural, contextual, and linguistic backgrounds other than the white Anglo-Saxon background (Grossman, 2002). Most assessments require that the students have some sort of prior knowledge of the question being asked to accurately pick the correct answer. For example Grossman states the following,

Students of color, poor, and limited English proficient students are not always exposed to the same materials, tasks, environments, and so on as European American, middle-class, and English proficient students. A question such as how far is it from one place to another is only relevant if students are familiar with the places. Asking why it is better to pay bills by check rather than cash is not relevant to children whose parents cannot afford a checking account. (p. 53)

Grossman (2002) also points out the need for limited English proficient students to be tested in two languages, English and their native language to accurately asses what they know. This however is hard to do. Except for Spanish language materials there is little guidance for the many other languages.

Often behavior may also be a characteristic that leads to the mislabeling of minorities in special education classes. Ferguson (2000) did field work at Rosa Parks Elementary School for three years. There she noticed that one of the techniques for sorting children was through Special Education. The school had two programs that they utilized for Special Education services, one being a pull out program titled a Resource Specialist Program (RSP). This program entailed students being pulled out for one or two classes for individualized instruction. The second program was titled Special Day Class (SDC). This program called for students to be placed for half or full day services in a separate classroom. This program was reserved for students who had severe learning or emotional disabilities. Ferguson reported that all of the students in that class with the exception of two were African American. Some were there because of learning problems while others were there because they had been “acting out” which linked them to being emotionally disturbed. All of the students that fit this category were predominately male and all were African American.

Finally the lack of teacher training for regular education teachers is a problem that occurs within special education. Inappropriate referrals can be decreased when teachers are given assistance designed to solve problems with specific students in their classrooms (Grossman, 2002). Often the students that learn differently are perceived by regular education teachers as problems.

Because of mainstreaming and inclusion measures and No Child Left Behind teachers are teaching students who have learning disabilities in their classroom now more than any other time in history. Hechinger (2007) states in his article that “By 2005, about 54% of special education students were taught in ‘fully inclusive’ settings—spending

80% or more of the school day in regular classroom—up from 33% in 1990” (p. 2).

Hechinger also reports the following about teacher dissatisfaction due to mainstreaming:

Each year, about 16% of teachers quit their jobs, either leaving the profession or moving to another school, according to recent U.S. Department of Education surveys. Of those, 35% cite difficulties with mainstreaming special-education students as a main reason for their dissatisfaction. (p. 2)

These statistics are alarming and should make districts really think about how they can care for the teachers who teach general education courses in which students are mainstreamed or are on the border of needing special education services.

Teacher training is a tool in which school districts should implement to help their regular education teachers feel more comfortable and confident when working with students who have learning disabilities. Districts should be aware of research when planning specific teacher education programs. According to a study conducted by Smith (2007):

Teachers are willing to receive intensive training on teaching strategies used for students with disabilities, appropriate behavioral interventions, and also about various disabilities in general. However, the training should be led by practicing special-education teachers, particularly the special-education staff at the high school in which they are employed. The information delivered should consist of real life experiences about what has worked in the classroom for teachers and what has not. Specific teaching strategies and behavioral interventions should be clearly outlined and presented in a manner that would allow teachers to quickly refer to on a daily basis. (p. 65)

Not only is it important for teacher training but also getting parents involved in the education process

Parents in general have a huge responsibility. As the parent of two girls I am constantly thinking about my girls and am concerned about their well-being. I want them to be successful in and outside of school. I want them to have many affinities and enjoy learning about new topics. My feelings mirror the thoughts of parents all over the world. Parents want their children to be successful, but when a learning difference impedes that process, many parents do not know what to do. Parents have certain expectations for their children but sometimes these expectations can be shattered. Russell (2003) states that “Following the diagnosis of a child’s disability, parents have to develop new expectations concerning the child, their role as parents and the support services that are designed to meet their needs” (p. 144).

. Griffith (2001) discusses in his article, *Principal Leadership of Parent Involvement*, that parental involvement is beneficial to positive childhood development and school success. All teachers need a solid background about how children learn and how to guide parents when a child’s learning may follow a different path. The way in which schools and educators care about their students and families is a vital factor in the overall learning process of the child. Epstein (1995) discusses how the school should connect with students and their families:

THE WAY schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children’s families. If educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view students

as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children's education and development. Partners recognize their shared interests in and responsibilities for children, and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students. (p. 701)

Most educators realize the importance of parental involvement due to their educational pre-service classes, experiences in the classrooms, and federal mandates. In a recent article Newman (2005) discusses how No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) addresses parental involvement:

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has brought an increased awareness of the importance of family-school connections for focusing on the integral role parents play in assisting their children's learning, encouraging parents to be actively involved in their children's education, and including, for the first time in the history of federal education legislation, a specific statutory definition of parent involvement. (p. 1)

According to Webster (2005) and his research on parental involvement, "parental involvement has been federally mandated for all U.S. public schools since the early 1960's" (p. 2). Obviously parental involvement is important but it is "particularly important for children with learning disabilities" (Newman, 2005, p. 1). IDEA 2004 (Individualized Education Act) offers parents even more choices than the previous law (Aydt, Lacoff, Miller, & Naset, 2006). These choices include:

1. Parents and local schools are now able to agree to change IEPs without having to have a formal IEP meeting.

2. If a student with a disability is not making adequate yearly progress and attends a school that has been targeted for improvement by NCLB, IDEA gives parents leverage to demand that the school district receive state funds to support supplemental education services for their children.
3. Under IDEA 2004, if parents have a complaint, the district is required to hold a pre-hearing meeting with the parents to discuss their concerns and attempt to work together toward resolving the issue. (p. 18)

Aydt et al., states that “through provisions like these, parents have gained a stronger voice in advocating for their children, particularly in instances when they feel that their specific needs are being overlooked or underestimated” (p. 18).

Currently parents as well as schools are struggling to help special needs students. An example of this struggle is special education programs in the Washington D.C. school district. There is a huge mistrust feeling among the parents towards the school system in regards to special education (Samuels, 2005). Samuels (2005) states “While DCPS has incorporated the basic mandate of IDEA into its educational structure, its special education program suffers from systemic deficiencies, including a lack of DCPS-operated programs, outdated facilities, and inadequate and uncertified staff”(p. 10). The D.C. school district is also loosing large amounts of money because of IDEA 2004. Many parents are demanding better services for their children because they don’t feel they are being adequately served in the D.C. school district. The D.C. school district is paying for about one third of the city’s special education population to be enrolled in private schools or other districts. Because the D.C. school district has such a large special education population, it is vital that they look at what needs to be done to gain parental trust and

involvement. Both NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004) indicate the vital roles parents play in their child's education. It is up to the schools to implement programs that involve parents and build a foundation for parents to be involved in their child's life. When implementing educational programs it is vital that the teachers understand the program and are well trained in the new ideas presented through various professional development programs.

One avenue towards equipping teachers with tools to feel more confident and comfortable teaching students with learning disabilities is Schools Attuned. The training consists of 45 hours, 35 hours of training and 10 hours of practicum. The core course (35 hours) teaches educators about the neurodevelopmental framework of the brain. At various sites, teachers are getting involved in the Schools Attuned training to help them grasp the neurodevelopmental functions of the brain and learn how to apply this information in a classroom setting.

Rubin (2002) defines Schools Attuned as follows: "Schools attuned provides K-12 educators with a framework to understand how brain functions impact learning, a common language to accurately identify learning difficulties, and strategies to address problem areas with a positive outlook"(p. 12). Presscott (2000) states that Levine, founder of Schools Attuned, believes that "to surmount learning differences, he believes, teachers, parents, and students alike must be taught how to recognize, understand, and manage both strengths and weaknesses in brain function" (p. 1-2).

Schools Attuned invites parents to be involved. One avenue in which parent participation is needed is through the process of "Attuning a Student" (All Kinds of Minds [AKOM],2004, p. 1). According to the All Kinds of Minds [AKOM], (2004) "the process of Attuning a Student provides tools and methods to help teachers, students, and



their parents understand how students' neurodevelopmental differences can affect their learning, particularly in school"(p. 1). The "attuning" of a child requires parent input as well as the involvement of the classroom teacher. Parents are asked to complete a pamphlet titled *Parent's View*. The *Parent's View* helps the teacher to understand the child's strengths, interests, and weaknesses. The parent is instructed to use information from academic and nonacademic areas to assist them when completing the booklet (All Kinds of Minds [AKOM], 2002). The *Parent's View* asks parents to share their observations about their child's learning in the present and during their younger years (2002). This is done to help the parents begin to understand the learning profile of their own child.

Once data is received from parents it is then compiled with data from the student himself along with data from the classroom teacher, which includes classroom observations and original work samples from students. Once the data has been collected and analyzed, a student profile is built and linked to the child's school performance (All Kinds of Minds [AKOM], 2004). From the student profile a management plan is created and discussed with the child and his parents (2004). Through this plan parents are able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their child and how to better help them socially and academically.

#### PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

My research will seek to understand the impact that Schools Attuned has on the family. The research provided through this dissertation may open doors for parents of learning disabled children. Doors may not be opened everywhere through the Schools Attuned Program, but hopefully the data gathered through the interviews has shed light

on the trials and tribulations parents go through when they don't have help. It is my hope that this research will further educate parents about learning differences and educate them about one program (Schools Attuned) that seeks to help children with learning disabilities. This research could be a resource for regular education, special education teachers, and building administrators as they try to establish relationships with their parents and open doors of communication with parents of learning disabled children. This study also benefits the Schools Attuned Program in that it may allow them a glimpse of how the program is affecting a small group of parents who have children in a school aligned with the Schools Attuned Program.

#### NEED FOR THE STUDY

After deciding to pursue Schools Attuned as my dissertation topic I began searching for other research. I located two dissertations that incorporated Schools Attuned. The research of these dissertations placed an emphasis on the teacher's role and the effect of the program on the educator's self-efficacy and that of teacher change. Other research that is underway for Schools Attuned is as follows: (All Kinds of Minds [AKOM], 1999-2007).

1. Evaluating student achievement in the Schools Attuned Model
2. A research study to measure the impact of Schools Attuned on Special Education
3. Evaluation of the Schools Attuned Program when combined with various mentoring programs. (p. 1-2)

Other research by independent researchers has involved the impact of Schools Attuned on students and schools. I have not been able to locate a specific study dealing with the

parents of children who have learning differences and the impact that Schools Attuned has had for these families. To my knowledge my study deviates from other studies in that it focuses on parents and their views about Schools Attuned. Thus this study will be important for parents to be allowed to tell their stories. Through these stories others will learn about Schools Attuned and special education as a whole. Only through the experiences and advice of others do we continue to grow and change the way education has been in the past. Lopez (1990) states the following about the need for people to tell their stories,

The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put there stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves. (p. 48)

This research is needed for other parents and for their needs to stay alive as they embark upon the big world of education. Ferguson (2002) assures the reader the need for research that lets others speak:

The elaboration of the stress and adaptation models and the family life span orientation have allowed researchers to rediscover the rich body of information available in the stories that families have always been willing to tell about their experiences. These stories are useful as more than simply accounts of the past. In telling us about their live "then," families are equally telling us about their lives "now." (p. 129)

Finally the study is needed for social justice in education for a specific group of people. That group of people is the families who have children with learning disabilities.

Dewey (1944) describes the word education as “a process of leading or bringing up” (p. 10). He goes on to state that “When we have the outcome of the process in mind, we speak of education as shaping, forming, molding activity-that is, a shaping into the standard form of social activity” (p. 10). Education should rear and shape children to become independent and creative thinkers. This process should not be limited to the mainstream student who learns conventionally but should also include those students who learn outside of the box. Social justice will be achieved once schools accept students who learn outside of the box and help to mold them in their unique way of learning. Schools have the ability to constructively change the way society views children with learning disabilities. But before this can happen the schools must listen to the stories of parents and respond in a positive way.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### Main Question

- What happens to families when they become engaged with the Schools Attuned program?

### Sub Questions

- Describe the culture that Schools Attuned emphasizes and how has this ideal impacted your family?
- How has the Schools Attuned Program helped the parents become involved in their child’s education?
- How has the Schools Attuned Program affected the relationship between the child and parents?

- Has the information learned through Schools Attuned carried over to other siblings and family members?

## OVERVIEW OF STUDY DESIGN

The design of this study is a qualitative phenomenological research investigation. This method allows me as the researcher to focus on the phenomenon of parents and their feelings towards Schools Attuned. I interviewed 10 individual parents to uncover the behavioral changes that have taken place since being engaged in Schools Attuned. I focused on a group of parents who have children with learning differences that attend a private school named Mountain School in Texas. I also asked the parents for any artifacts that they might like to present when telling their stories regarding Schools Attuned.

Once the interviews were complete, I transcribed them. I mailed each participant a copy of the transcribed interview for a member check. Once the transcripts had been reviewed I began to analyze the transcripts for recurring themes, and then implications. The following glossary will serve as a background for understanding the study and terms used throughout the text.

## GLOSSARY

NCLB – (No Child Left Behind) Act of 2001 was signed into law on January 8, 2002 by President George Bush. The Act represents the President’s education reform plan and contains the most sweeping changes to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) since it was enacted in 1965 (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2006).

IDEA – (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) The primary special education law.

The Act and its requirements are based on the principles below:

- Free appropriate public education
- Appropriate evaluation
- Individualized education program
- Least restrictive environment
- Procedural safeguards
- Parent and student participation in decision-making. (Bauer & Shea, 2003, p. 40)

Special Education – The term “special education” means specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability. Depending on your child’s needs as well as the state, school district and local school policies, special education services may be offered in a variety of ways and in a variety of settings.

(National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2006, p. 6)

Specific Learning Disability – IDEA define SLD as “A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.” (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2006, p. 8)

IEP (Individualized Education Program) – A written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed and revised according to the requirements of IDEA.(National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2006, p. 36)

Least Restrictive Environment – To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are to be educated with children who are not disabled. Special classes, separate schooling, or other ways of removing children with disabilities from the regular educational environment should only occur when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes cannot be achieved satisfactorily with the use of supplementary aids and services. (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2006, p. 36)

Attuning a Student – a comprehensive process that strengthens educators’ abilities to reach young minds-especially those who are struggling to learn-in a meaningful and lasting way. The words “attuned” and “attuning” are intended to convey a commitment among all of the players-students, educators, and parents-to be aware of and address the wide range of neurodevelopmental and academic strengths and concerns possessed by students. (All Kinds of Minds [AKOM], 2002- 2004, p. 1)

Accommodations – Strategies for bypassing weak functions. (All Kinds of Minds [AKOM], 2001, p. 11)

Interventions – Strategies for strengthening weak functions. (All Kinds of Minds [AKOM], 2001, p. 11)

Demystification – The primary content of a demystification session addresses the roles that strengths, weaknesses, and affinities may play in the student’s school performance and lays out a management plan to improve this performance to enable the student to be more successful in school. (All Kinds of Minds [AKOM], 2002-2004, p. 1)

#### LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

The study was limited to one private school in which all of the faculty and staff had been trained in Schools Attuned. This is a unique school that was specifically

designed to meet the needs of students who had learning differences. The class sizes were very small compared to that of public schools so more individualized attention was given to the students.

I as the researcher had difficulty in separating Schools Attuned from the school itself. There were many instances in which I asked myself, “What makes Mountain School such a positive place, is it Schools Attuned or other facets of the school?” This is a question with which I continue to wrestle.

As the researcher I was the only person, besides the participants present at the interviews. There may have been instances in which I generalized body language or asked questions that purposefully led to information that fit my study. As the researcher I entered into the worlds of these 10 participants and became personally involved. I am biased to their side of their educational journey and only presented quotes in chapter IV from these participants. The other schools and teachers whom the participants may have discussed did not have an opportunity to present facts and reasons for some of the problems presented by the participants.

## SUMMARY

The chapters that follow will begin to unravel how schools can better serve families that have students with learning disabilities. Chapter II presents the history of special education and how we got where we are today. It will give the reader an overview of Schools Attuned and other educational programs. Chapter II will also discuss the importance of parental involvement in special education.

Chapter III discusses the methodology and theory that guided the study. It also presents a description of procedures and techniques used for the study. Chapter IV is the



chapter is which the themes are discussed and organized. The emergent themes are documented by quotes from the interview participants. This chapter will also introduce the reader to Mountain School and the 10 interview participant. The final chapter will suggest implications and recommendations based upon the data received from chapter four. This chapter will also recommend further research and ideas for replication.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

*Only the brave dare look upon the gray-  
upon the things which cannot be explained easily,  
upon the things which often engender mistakes,  
upon the things whose cause cannot be understood,  
upon the things we must accept and live with.  
And therefore only the brave dare look upon difference  
without flinching.*

- Richard H. Hungerford, “*On Locusts*” -

### SUMMARY

Chapter I established for the reader a number of problems within special education. The chapter also introduced a professional development program, Schools Attuned that is intended to help families, students, and educators come to an understanding of leaning differences. This chapter identified the major research question: What happens to families when they become engaged with the Schools Attuned program? Chapter II will review literature that traces the study to critical theory and also discuss literature pertaining to the history of special education with sub sections on the Least Restrictive Environment, learning disabilities, back ground on Schools Attuned, other educational programs, and the importance of parental involvement. All of these sections

help to clarify where special education has been and where it is going. If educators and schools systems will listen to the stories presented in this study by the parents future educational programs and pre-service education training for educators could benefit greatly.

### CONNECTING CRITICAL THEORY TO THE STUDY

The study focuses on families, especially parents, but also recognizes the needs and issues with the students who have learning differences. This qualitative study was examined from a critical-theory perspective that not only brought to the surface equality and justice for parents who have children with learning differences but also equality and justice for the students. Schubert (1997) states,

Critical theory is directed in the interest of emancipation. Here, emancipation refers to a freeing of one's self to enable growth and development from the taken-for-granted ideology of social conventions, beliefs, and modes of operation. It strives to renew the ideology so that it serves as a basis for reflection and action.  
(p. 318)

Other education scholars who have argued for critical theory along themes of race, gender, and such include Michael Apple, William Pinar, Madeline Grumet, and James Banks.

First, when I initially began this study I wanted to learn about the program Schools Attuned and how it affected the families who were engaged with the program. I soon realized that the students themselves felt a sense of educational freedom from attending Mountain School and from the Schools Attuned program. The students were taught how they learned and what tools to use to have success in their learning. The

majority of the students struggled when they did not understand their own learning and did not have the skills necessary overcome their learning difference. Giroux (2001) discusses how critical theory supports critical thinking by helping others have freedom and participate in social change. These students did discover a freedom that they could succeed academically and socially. Before entering into Mountain School and learning from teachers that were trained in Schools Attuned they did not have this type of educational freedom.

This study will hopefully create conversations within our educational system and open the eyes of educators to see a group of people that need help in discovering how they learn and how they can celebrate their learning differences. Crotty (1998) states the following about how critical inquiry should be ongoing:

Critical inquiry cannot be viewed as a discrete piece of action that achieves its objectives and comes to a close. With every action taken, the context changes and we must critique our assumptions again. Viewed in this way, critical inquiry emerges as an ongoing project. It is a cyclical process (better seen, perhaps, as a spiraling process for there is movement forward and upward) of reflection and action. (p.157)

We must continue in the process of helping students with learning differences achieve educational freedom. It is important to learn from the past and develop new ways to educate all students.

## HISTORY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

It has been said that the term special education probably arose from a meeting where Alexander Graham Bell coined the term “special education” in reference to

educating the deaf. He attempted were to form a group to educate the deaf but it “soon came to include the educators of the blind, and afterwards it took in those who are interested in the education of backward and feeble-minded children” (Winzer, 1998, p. 212). Since the term special education arose from that meeting much has taken place. Without the voices of social advocates such as Helen Keller, young brilliant physician such as Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, and famous educators such as Edouard Seguin, special education would not be where it is today.

Not only was Helen Keller an advocate for those with disabilities but she was also a political activist and spokesperson for victims of other types of oppression. Smith (1998) writes about the issues that Helen Keller was passionate about.

Helen Keller’s voice of advocacy was bold for its time. It was focused, however, on the potential for social intercourse and productivity in the lives of ignored, misunderstood, and exploited people. In that regard she moved beyond a social context that devalued many people with blindness, deafness, and other physical disabilities, for example, and she crusaded for their right to earn a place in society. (p. 198)

Itard, a French physician, “is the person to whom most historians trace the beginning of special education as we know it today”(Hallahan & Kauffman, 1991). Itard is known for educating a boy that was found roaming naked and wild in the forests of France. Although he did not fully educate this boy he dramatically changed his behavior and he was no longer considered a “hopeless idiot” (1991).

Edouard Seguin was a famous educator of retarded children who emigrated to the United States in 1848. He wrote a book titled *Idiocy and Its Treatment* describing Itard’s

methods which provided much of the foundational work for special education. The following ideas are from the works of Seguin, Itard and other successors. These ideas are what form the present-day foundations of special education (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1991),

- *Individualized instruction*, in which the child's characteristics rather than prescribed academic content provide the basis for teaching techniques.
- *A carefully sequenced series of educational tasks*, beginning with tasks the child can perform and gradually leading to more complex learning.
- *Emphasis on stimulation* and awakening of the child's senses, the aim being to make the child more aware of and responsive to educational stimuli.
- *Meticulous arrangement of the child's environment*, so that the structure of the environment and the child's experience of it lead naturally to learning.
- *Immediate reward for correct performance*, providing reinforcement for desirable behavior.
- *Tutoring in functional skills*, the desire being to make the child as self-sufficient and productive as possible in everyday life.
- *Belief that every child should be educated to the greatest extent possible*, the assumption being that every child can improve to some degree. (p. 19)

Not only have people and advocate groups set standards and built the foundation for special education but landmark court cases have opened the doors of equal opportunity for special education. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement led to changes for minorities, especially African Americans. Due to this movement and the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* major victories were born for

minorities which encompassed those with disabilities. Yell, Rogers, & Rogers (1998) comment on these two historical moments in time.

*Brown v. Board of Education* was a major underpinning for further civil rights action. The *Brown* decision not only had a tremendous impact on societal rights for minorities, but also affected many aspects of educational law and procedure. Although it took time, the precedents set in *Brown* resulted in sweeping changes in the schools' policies and approaches to students with disabilities. (p. 220)

After the *Brown v. Board of Education* two other monumental cases were decided to help further special education. In 1972 *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* decided the right to education and due process for mentally retarded children in Pennsylvania. Also in that same year *Mills v. Board of Education of (then) District of Columbia* decided upon the right to an education and due process for all children with disabilities in Washington D.C. (Davis, 2004).

As litigation began to pave the way for special education, few would contradict that the summit for special education was in 1975 with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142, renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. This law requires that every eligible student receive a "free and appropriate public education" (FAPE). The basic tenets for students to ensure that they receive FAPE are as follows:

- eligibility based on nondiscriminatory and multidisciplinary assessments,
- parent involvement and consent,
- and individualized education program (IEP), and

- educational placement in the least restrictive environment. (Rock, Thead, & Gable, 2006, p. 3)

IDEA changed in 1997 in various ways for children that qualify for special education.

The changes include the level of involvement of parents when making decisions for their child, which would call for a higher level of involvement and also how the public schools can discipline children that are placed on Individualized Education Plans (Seltzer, 1998).

Since 1997, IDEA has changed because of a specific act established by the George W. Bush administration.

In 2004 President Bush signed into law the “Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004,” which aligns with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Aydt, Lacoff, Miller, & Naset, 2006). Aydt, Lacoff, et.al., outline the four target areas of IDEA 2004:

- a great focus on student academic outcomes (specifically aligning IDEA to NCLB);
- parental choice;
- over-identification or misidentification of special education students;
- paperwork reduction. (p. 17)

The goals of NCLB 2001 are straightforward and encompass all students, even those with disabilities. The Supreme Court case, *Schaffer v. Weast* (2005) states that “No Child Left Behind expects children with disabilities to be proficient in academic skills, including math and reading. The educational achievement gap between more advantaged children and children with disabilities is to be closed” (p. 18) Rock, Thead, Gable,



Hardman, & Van Acker (2006) state the following concerning the straightforwardness of the NCLB law towards students with disabilities:

All students can and will learn more than they currently are learning, and all students will succeed if schools expect the highest academic standards. If students don't succeed, public schools must be held accountable for their failure. The definition of success is determined by student proficiency on content specified by the state and as measured by state performance standards. NCLB's promise of "all means all" includes students with disabilities. The fundamental purpose of NCLB is to assure access to the curriculum upon which the standards were based, access to assessments that measure performance on the standards, and inclusion in the reported results that determine how well a school is meeting the established performance criteria. (p. 4)

Due to this promise of criteria in NCLB of "all students" each student's Individualized Education Plan includes objectives or performance goals "that must conform to a state's definition of 'annual yearly progress (AYP)' as required in NCLB. Students with disabilities are an identifiable subgroup under NCLB, and their progress as measured by AYP must be disaggregated and reported publicly" (Rock, Thead, & Gable, 2006, p. 4).

In addition to the above criteria set by NCLB, all special educators that teach core academic subjects have to meet the "highly qualified teacher" standards set forth in NCLB (Rock, Thead, & Gable, 2006). Smith (2005) states the following in regards to the standard "highly qualified teacher":

IDEA 2004 now requires teachers to be "highly qualified." Highly qualified means that,

1. All special education teachers must be highly qualified under the NCLB definition: also special education teachers must have a state special education certification; not hold an emergency, temporary, or provisional certification; and have at least a bachelor's degree.
2. Special education teachers who teach content courses and are the teachers of record for those courses must meet the NCLB *highly qualified* requirements. This means that they must be licensed in the subjects taught, similar to general classroom teachers under NCLB. (pp. 315-316)

An idea that has not changed but remained constant is educating students with disabilities in the most “normal” academic atmosphere possible otherwise known as the Least Restrictive Environment.

#### The Least Restrictive Environment

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act and later renamed IDEA (1990, 1997, and 2004) mandated that all children receiving special education be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment. The least restrictive environment (LRE) is defined as (Douvani and Hulse, 2002):

To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities...should be educated with children who are not disabled, and...special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment should occur only when the nature of severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (pp. 1-2)

The two vehicles that school districts implement to educate children with disabilities while abiding by the Least Restrictive Environment law are mainstreaming and inclusion.

Idol (1997) discusses the differences between mainstreaming and inclusion,

*Inclusion* is when students with disabilities receive their entire academic curriculum in the general education program. This is different from *mainstreaming*, which is when students with disabilities spend a portion of their school day in the general education program and a portion in a separate special education program. (p. 78)

There are differing views among school districts regarding whether to have full inclusion of students or mainstreaming of students. Some school districts side with full inclusion because they feel that having separate special education classes cause special education to become a “dumping ground” for regular education teachers. If a student is difficult to teach they are often referred to be tested for special education. The argument is that if full inclusion is present all general education teachers would have to learn best practices in reaching all students. There would be no other choice but to keep all of the students, even those that might be referred to special education.

Whether school districts choose to mainstream or full inclusion measures it is important that both the regular education teacher and the special education teacher develop a strong working relationship that results in open communication and both looking out for the best interest of the student. Regular education teachers need to be aware of the special academic needs a student might have, the social needs, the perceptions and attitudes of the parents, and the effects of inclusion or mainstreaming on

achievement (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 1987). By being aware of these needs teachers can face ever changing classrooms with confidence.

### Learning Disabilities

Teachers are continuously challenged with full classrooms and children who learn differently due to a learning disability. Regular education teachers also need to be aware and educated about learning disabilities because of mainstreaming and inclusion that fulfills the Least Restrictive Environment law from IDEA. Learning disabilities cannot only create obstacles for the teacher but for the student and his family as well. Learning disabilities should not be looked at as obstacles but as just merely a different way of learning. If general education teachers are trained to deal with students who learn differently the whole classroom could benefit. The term learning disability will be used interchangeably with the term learning difference in chapter IV and V. Many of the parents that were interviewed for this research used the term learning difference replacing learning disability. They felt as though learning disability was a negative label and limited their child.

According to the Learning Disabilities Association of America (2004) a learning disability is defined as,

A neurological disorder that affects one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written language. The disability may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations. Learning disabilities should not be confused with learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing,

or motor handicaps; of mental retardation; of emotional disturbance; or of environmental, cultural or economic disadvantages. (p. 1)

The term learning disability is an umbrella encompassing more specific terms (Learning Disabilities Association of America, 2004),

- Dyslexia – a language and reading disability
- Dyscalculia – problems with arithmetic and math concepts
- Dysgraphia – a writing disorder resulting in illegibility
- Dyspraxia (Sensory Integration Disorder) – problems with motor coordination
- Central Auditory Processing Disorder – difficulty processing and remembering language-related tasks
- Non-Verbal Learning Disorders – trouble with nonverbal cues, e.g., body language; poor coordination, clumsy
- Visual Perceptual/Visual Motor Deficit – reverses letters; cannot copy accurately; eyes hurt and itch; loses place; struggles with cutting
- Language Disorders (Aphasia/Dysphasia) – trouble understanding spoken language; poor reading comprehension. (pp. 1-2)

If a student with a learning disability is not identified and helped to succeed in the classroom, self esteem problems and family harmony could be in jeopardy. Learning disabilities are real. They affect each child differently and can definitely cause the child to hate school. Dr. Levine (2002b), a developmental pediatrician, states that “it is not unusual for such students to lose motivation, to become painfully (and often secretly) anxious about themselves, to display noncompliance, to commit antisocial acts (including substance abuse and delinquent activity), and to lose ambition” (p. 1). According to

Kenyon (2003), “learning disabilities cannot be seen, they often go undetected. Recognizing a learning disability is even more difficult because the severity and characteristics vary” (p. 2). Many times a learning disability is not recognized until the child begins formal schooling (Kenyon, 2003).

The number of children with learning disabilities is on the rise. According to National Institutes of Health (2003) specific learning disabilities have increased 22% over the past 25 years. Students with learning disabilities within the age category of 6 to 21 years have increased by 38% in the past decade. As this number continues to escalate, it is important that parents and teachers watch for signs of learning disabilities exhibited at home and in the classroom. Kenyon (2003) lists the following as characteristics of learning disabilities:

#### What are Characteristics of Learning Disabilities

- An important requirement in the diagnosis of learning disabilities is the discrepancy between intelligence, or one’s ability to perform, and their actual performance.
- There is no one sign that shows a person has a learning disability. Characteristics that may be apparent include:
  - trouble learning the alphabet, rhyming words, or connection letters to their sounds;
  - problems identifying individual sounds in spoken words;
  - not reading for pleasure;
  - not making use of reading to gather information;
  - making many errors when reading aloud, and repeating and pausing often;
  - focusing on word recognition to such a degree that it detracts from reading comprehension;
  - not understanding what he or she reads;
  - showing persistent problems with spelling;
  - having sloppy handwriting that is difficult to read or holding a pencil awkwardly;
  - struggling to express ideas and communicate in writing;
  - learning language late, lacking complex language and having a limited vocabulary;
  - having trouble remembering the sounds that letters make or hearing slight distinctions between words;
  - having trouble understanding jokes, comic strips, and sarcasm;

- having difficulty with non-literal or figurative language such as metaphors, idioms and sarcasm;
- having trouble following directions;
- mispronouncing words or using a wrong word that sounds similar;
- having difficulty with verbal memory and processing large amounts of spoken language;
- having trouble organizing what he or she wants to say or not being able to think of the word needed for writing or conversation;
- not following the social rules of conversation, such as taking turns, and standing too close to the listener;
- confusing math symbols, misreading numbers, or difficulty retrieving math facts;
- having visual-spatial deficits and ineffective use of visual imagery;
- having difficulties in language processing that affect math problem-solving;
- difficulty retelling a story in order (what happened first, second, third);
- not knowing where to begin a task or how to go on from there;
- having a distinct gap between the level of achievement that is expected and what is actually being achieved;
- having problems with abstract reasoning;
- making impulsive decisions and judgments;
- difficulties with socio-emotional skills and behavior;
- a lack of “executive functions,” including self-motivation, self-reliance, self-advocacy and goal-setting; or
- problems with attention, which may be accompanied by hyperactivity, distractibility or passivity (p. 5).

\*Used by permission of Dr. Rochelle Kenyon, Master Trainer Bridges to Practice.  
<http://www.floridatechnet.org/bridges>

It is easy for learning disabilities to go undiagnosed; 30 – 50% of students suffer from this phenomenon of undiagnosed disability (Kenyon, 2003).

Students with learning disabilities often become frustrated and feel the desire to give up. Many students with learning disabilities do not receive special services for their learning disability so they rely upon their general education teachers and parents to recognize their learning differences and develop a plan to help them succeed in the classroom. As Traw (2002) describes in his article, *The Woodcrafters’ City*, many

children need their “woodcrafter” or teacher to show them the way and develop their own masterpieces.

John was not the most skilled carver among the children. His strokes were often clumsy and his carvings rough, showing none of the grace that marked the work of many of the other children. The master would show the children how to grip a carving knife or angle a chisel, or how a hammer could be made to tap softly or soundly strike, and sometimes John would try these ways. (p. 1)

All educators need to understand and learn how to identify each student’s individual learning needs.

#### ASPECTS OF SCHOOLS ATTUNED

Schools Attuned believes in helping the individual child with a learning disability gain success in the academic and social world (Levine, 2002a). Children misbehaving in the classroom can often be linked to a learning disability. When children do not understand instructions given for a specific activity or understand the activity itself they will cause a disruption in the classroom (Language Video, 2002). Arnn (2005) describes in her research concerning Schools Attuned that:

Schools Attuned helps teachers understand that a student who misbehaves is not necessarily a miscreant but is one who may not understand instruction. Strategies are provided for the teacher to assist the individual student and to assist the entire class at once. Solutions to problems with classroom management and student engagement through the use of effective instructional strategies are also provided, and they are practiced, reflected upon, and discussed by the participants. (p. 19-20)



Schools Attuned is open for all educators at a cost. Many school districts have provided scholarships, to send their teachers, through private organizations. Oklahoma has developed “The Schools Attuned Program, Oklahoma” which is a state initiative and funded by the Oklahoma State Legislature (All Kinds of Minds [AKOM], 2007). Oklahoma educators, who apply may participate in this program without incurring the \$1500 participant fee (2007). The only state other than Oklahoma that has made Schools Attuned a state initiative is North Carolina where the program originated (2007). The state of North Carolina in partnership with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, was the first state to launch a state initiative for the Schools Attuned program. Both Oklahoma and North Carolina have recognized the importance of educating their educators about the differences in learning and how to address these differences in the classroom. Oklahoma State Superintendent, Sandy Garrett, states that “The Schools Attuned Program, Oklahoma will help all students meet higher standards and prepare public school educators to recognize and address individual differences in how students learn. We’re very excited to bring these valuable tools to our teachers” (All Kinds of Minds [AKOM], 2007).

Just recently the Oklahoma 2009 teacher of the year, Heather Sparks, was recognized and attributed her success to Schools Attuned. She states the following about her training through Schools Attuned (Cummings & Kinman, 2008),

Schools Attuned is a professional development experience that has significantly changed my teaching. After completing the Core Course in 2000, I returned to my classroom to find that my ability to help students who typically struggle in school improved tremendously. The strategies and skills I learned from Schools Attuned

still assist me daily as I work with my students. I believe every educator would benefit from the powerful professional development. (p. 1)

The Schools Attuned Program is divided into two paths, the generalist and subject specialists. Both of these paths teach the premises of the Schools Attuned program. Both paths are offered based upon the educator's needs. The generalist path would fit the needs of elementary teachers and special educators who teach various content areas, while the subject specialist path would encompass teachers who teach only one or two specialized contents areas, such as secondary teachers. Both paths address the same principles and course guidelines (All Kinds of Minds [AKOM], 2005). The Schools Attuned Program is based upon the following nine principles:

1. A Positive View of Neurodevelopmental Diversity.
2. A Stress on Neurodevelopmental Profiles.
3. A Quest for Specificity and Individuality.
4. A Policy of Labeling Observable Phenomena Rather than Children.
5. A Commitment to Collaboration among Professionals, Parents, and Children.
6. A Desire to Strengthen the Strengths and Affinities of Children.
7. A Belief in the Value of Demystification.
8. A Consistent Effort to Help Learners Learn about Learning.
9. An Infusion of Optimism for Kids with All Kinds of Minds. (All Kinds of Minds [AKOM], 2005, p. INT 11- INT12)

Levine (2002a) describes the Schools Attuned Program in his book *A Mind at a Time* as “the broadest and most comprehensive training experience” (p. 312). He also lists the components for the program as follows:

Training	Teachers undergo intensive education about neurodevelopmental function and variation, most often in weeklong summer courses or through the year.
Ongoing assistance	Teachers have mentors who help them renew and apply what they've learned throughout the school year.
Networking	Teachers have regularly scheduled "grand rounds" to discuss their work with students; also, they have access to the Schools Attuned Web site facilities.
Tools	Teachers use computer-based instruments, the Views Attuned, to observe systematically and help struggling kids from kindergarten through twelfth grade; also they apply various classroom management guidelines we provide.
Consultation	Teachers receive help with specific children working with a specially trained "profile advisor," who helps them interpret profiles and derive plans. (p. 312-313)

Levine (2005) has developed a table titled, *A Table of Neurodevelopmental Constructs*, which lists the eight neurodevelopmental constructs, their functions, and components. This table is a tool that teachers who have been trained by Schools Attuned can use when developing the students' management plan and for other activities as well; it follows.

Attention	Temporal-Sequential Ordering	Spatial Ordering	Memory	Language	Neuromotor Functions	Social Cognition	Higher Order Cognition
<b>Mental Energy Controls</b> ➤ Alertness ➤ Mental Effort ➤ Sleep/Arousal Balance ➤ Performance Consistency  <b>Processing Controls</b> ➤ Saliency ➤ Determination ➤ Depth/Detail of Processing ➤ Cognitive Activation ➤ Focal Maintenance ➤ Satisfaction Level  <b>Production Controls</b> ➤ Previewing ➤ Facilitation/Inhibition ➤ Pacing ➤ Self-Monitoring ➤ Reinforceability	<b>Sequential Awareness</b>  <b>Sequential Perception</b>  <b>Sequential Memory</b>  <b>Sequential Output</b>  <b>Time Management</b>  <b>Higher Sequential Thinking</b>	<b>Spatial Awareness</b>  <b>Spatial Perception</b>  <b>Spatial Memory</b>  <b>Spatial Output</b>  <b>Material Management</b>  <b>Higher Spatial Thinking</b>	<b>Short-Term Memory</b> ➤ Saliency ➤ Determination ➤ Recoding ➤ Depth/Detail of Processing  <b>Active Working Memory</b> ➤ Idea ➤ Maintenance ➤ Task ➤ Component ➤ Maintenance ➤ Proximal/Distal ➤ Planning ➤ Short-Term to Long-Term ➤ Memory ➤ Linkage  <b>Long Term Memory</b>  Consolidation ➤ Paired ➤ Association ➤ Filing ➤ Procedure Filing ➤ Rule/Pattern/ ➤ Schema Filing ➤ Category Filing  Access ➤ Association ➤ Pattern ➤ Recognition/ ➤ Method Transfer ➤ Recall	<b>Receptive Language</b> ➤ Phonological ➤ Processing ➤ Morphological ➤ Sense ➤ Semantic ➤ Understanding ➤ Sentence ➤ Comprehension ➤ Discourse ➤ Processing  <b>Expressive Language</b> ➤ Articulation/ ➤ Fluency ➤ Semantic Use ➤ Word Retrieval ➤ Sentence ➤ Formulation ➤ Discourse ➤ Production ➤ Verbal ➤ Elaboration	<b>Gross Motor Function</b> ➤ Outer Spatial ➤ Processing ➤ Body Position ➤ Sense ➤ Gross Motor ➤ Production ➤ Gross Motor ➤ Memory ➤ Gross Motor ➤ Problem ➤ Solving/Logic  <b>Fine Motor Function</b> ➤ Eye-Hand ➤ Coordination ➤ Fine Motor ➤ Procedural ➤ Memory ➤ Fine Motor ➤ Problem ➤ Solving/Logic  <b>Graphomotor Function</b> ➤ Pre- ➤ Visualization ➤ Graphomotor ➤ Memory ➤ Graphomotor ➤ Production ➤ Graphomotor ➤ Feedback	<b>Verbal Pragmatics</b> ➤ Communications/ ➤ Interpretation of ➤ Feelings ➤ Code Switching ➤ Topic ➤ Selection/Mainten ➤ nance ➤ Humor Regulation ➤ Conversational ➤ Techniques  <b>Social Behaviors</b> ➤ Self-Marketing ➤ Social Information ➤ Processing ➤ Collaboration ➤ Initiation ➤ Social Control ➤ Regulation ➤ Timing/Staging ➤ Relationships ➤ Social ➤ Conceptualization ➤ Conflict Resolution  <b>Political Acumen</b>	<b>Concept Formation</b> ➤ Verbal ➤ Conceptualization ➤ Non-Verbal ➤ Conceptualization ➤ Process ➤ Conceptualization  <b>Critical Thinking</b>  <b>Creativity/ Brainstorming</b>  <b>Problem Solving</b>  <b>Rule Use</b>  <b>Reasoning/Logical Thinking</b>  <b>Mental Representation</b>

By Melvin D. Levine, M.D., F.A.A.P., Co-Founder and Co-Chair, All Kinds of Minds

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When teachers recognize a student that may be struggling with a certain subject or displaying actions that characterize a learning disability they would begin the demystification process. Demystifying a student merely means to “take the mystery out of learning.” This process will teach the student, teacher, and parent how the student’s brain functions and what neurodevelopment construct is being challenged. For the teacher to develop a learning profile on the students they must gather information from the student, parent, and work samples of the student. This process is discussed in detail in chapter one under purpose and significance of the study. The learning profile will begin to link how the student best learns and what accommodations and interventions would best benefit the student. The All Kinds of Minds website recommends specific activities for students and there is also a program where the teacher can input the data gathered to assist them when developing the learning profile. The teacher should also set up a meeting with the student and parent to go through the demystification planning and implementation of the management plan. This will make the student aware of his/her learning difference and give him/her the tools they need to be successful in social and academic settings.

## OTHER EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Hirsch (1999) discusses the importance of shared knowledge and what makes some students click and others not. In conjunction with this idea Hirsch (1999) makes the following statement, “Anyone who has ever taught a class knows that explaining a new subject will induce smiles of recognition in some students but looks of puzzlement in others”(p. 22). There are many educational programs that intend to help teachers as they

try to reach all of their students. Schools Attuned is just one of many educational programs geared toward students that may have learning differences or are considered “at risk” students. Schools Attuned and other programs that will be mentioned may also benefit the entire classroom, not only the child with a learning difference/disability.

Teachers often wonder how one student “gets it” and another student does not, when the subject matter is taught in the same delivery style. Hirsch (1999) alludes to the answer by stating, “Psychological research has shown that the ability to learn something new depends on an ability to accommodate the new thing to the already known” (p. 23). If the already known is not present then the new ideas will more than likely fall by the wayside.

Teachers who teach all students in the exact same method are leaving some behind. Schools Attuned is one program that prides itself on giving teachers knowledge and tools to help children who may not “get it” or who may have a specific type of learning difference/disability. Other programs include, Reading First, Read 180, Great Expectations, Professional Learning Communities, F.A.T City, Peer Mentoring, and Integrated Play Group Model in School Settings .

#### Reading First

Reading First is a federal education program that has been mandated under the No Child Left Behind Act and is funded by the federal Department of Education. The program requires that schools funded by Reading First apply “scientifically based reading” research to ensure all children are reading by the end of third grade (Guide to U.S. Department of Education Programs, 2008). The state of Florida is one example trying to improve the effectiveness of interventions for struggling readers. A summary

document by Crawford and Torgesen (2005) from the Florida Center of Reading describe characteristics of Reading First schools demonstrating success in reaching their struggling readers. The following are implementations from the summary document used to be a successful Reading First school:

We must increase the quality, consistency, and reach of classroom instruction by providing systematic and explicit initial instruction, and by providing differentiated instruction delivered individually or in small groups. Small groups should be differentiated by;

- the frequency of meeting in small groups (3x/week, 5x/week)
- the size of the instructional group (3,6,8, students)
- the focus of instruction (phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension)
- the format of the lesson (guided reading vs. skills-focused). (p. 1)

Crawford and Torgesen (2005) also summarized the professional development attributes that successful Reading First schools have implemented in their schools:

- It takes more knowledge and skill to teach students who struggle in learning to read than it does for students who find it easier to learn.
- Utilizing a combination of personnel to deliver professional development
- High teacher turn-over is something that needs to be addressed in the professional development plan.
- Keeping up with training new teachers can be time consuming for coaches.
- Training for 'Special Area' teachers
- Differentiated Professional Development for teachers

## Examples

- “Mini workshops” provided by:
  - district level personnel
  - reading coaches
  - publishers
  - classroom teachers that have attended and outside district training
- Professional development provided:
  - during common planning times
  - after school
  - Saturdays
  - summer. (pp. 1-2)

The domains that Reading First schools try to accomplish are, “phonological/phonemic awareness, phonics word/recognition, fluency, text comprehension, vocabulary” (Texas Education Agency, 2008/2009, p.1).

### Read 180

Another educational program, oriented just to reading, used in schools today is titled Read 180. Like Schools Attuned, Read 180 also provides a spring board to help students with learning differences. The target audience of Read 180 is “grades 4-12 students who are performing below the proficient level on standards-based test. Special Education and ELL students have additional materials to meet their special needs” (Literacy Matters, Scholastic, Inc., p. 1). This program is based on the use of technology which will try to enhance students with mild disabilities (Literacy Matters).



Read 180 was mentioned in one of the interviews by a parent who has a daughter who teaches at a Texas school that implements Read 180. The program was brought into the school to help students that were not passing the Texas achievement tests. The parent that was interviewed discussed how successful her daughter's students had become because of this program. The instructional components of Read 180 include the following (Literacy Matters):

A self-paced computer program is the center of the approach. The program is based on a 90-minute instructional model that begins and ends with whole group direct instruction. The multi-part instructional model includes 1) 20 minutes of whole-class direct instruction in skills such as word analysis, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension; 2) 20 minutes of diagnostically-informed instruction in a small group with the teacher at a "teacher station;" 3) 20 minutes of independent software use, focused on individual skill practice; 4) 20 minutes of modeled and independent reading from paperbacks and/or audio books; and then 5) a 10-minute whole-class wrap-up. The room is set-up to facilitate rotations of students from computers to small group instruction to independent reading. (p. 1)

#### Great Expectations

Another program that increases teacher's knowledge of academics and varying subjects is Great Expectations which goes beyond reading. According to Great Expectations (2009) this program:

Provides high quality professional development that supports overall school

reform, teacher practices, and student learning. Teachers receive 28 hours of initial training with ongoing follow-up that ranges from 15 hours to 100 hours during the course of the year. The professional development helps teachers improve their knowledge and skills in teaching core content subjects. (p. 1)

Some of the Great Expectation's methodology practices that provide high quality professional development are as follows (Great Expectations, 2009),

- Students and teachers speak in complete sentences and address one another by name, demonstrating mutual respect and common courtesy.
- Students are taught as a whole group, thoroughly and to mastery, with intensive and specific modifications insuring success for all.
- Lessons are integrated, related to the real world, reviewed consistently, and connected to subsequent curricula.
- Critical thinking skills are taught.
- Memory work, recitations, and/or writing occur daily. These enhance character development and effective communication skills while extending curricula. Recitations are exuberant and full of expression.
- Enriched vocabulary is evident and is drawn directly from challenging writings and/or wisdom literature. Sources should include classic literature, myths, fables, poetry, proverbs, quotes, and other genres.
- Word identification skills are used as a foundation for expanding the use of the English language. (p. 1)

## F.A.T City

The author and founder of F.A.T City is Craig Lavoie. Lavoie (1999) developed this professional development program to help other educators develop an understanding of the daily pressures put on children with learning disabilities. Lavoie taught children with learning disabilities and decided to do what he could to help others when dealing with children who have learning disabilities. Lavoie describes the workshop in the following statement:

The F.A.T City workshop and video are my contributions to the important process of understanding learning disabilities. F.A.T stands for Frustration, Anxiety, and Tension – and that’s exactly what the participants experience. This workshop and video provide teachers, parents, caregivers, and siblings with the opportunity actually to experience the emotions and stresses those children with learning disabilities face daily. By using simulations and contrived activities as models (for example, telling a story without using any words that contain the letter N), the participants temporarily experience the frustration, anxiety, and tension that is the lifestyle of students with special needs

For the first time in years, these parents and educators are asked to sit on the other side of the teacher’s desk. They are required to recite aloud and complete timed spelling and writing activities under great pressure. I play the role of an unforgiving-and uninformed-teacher. I yell. I scold. I ridicule. I interrupt. I interrupt. I embarrass. (“Try harder!” “Pay attention!” “Are you trying to be funny?” “Why can’t you do this? Everyone else can.”)

The workshop gives teachers the opportunity to “walk a mile” in the shoes

of the students who invariably cause complications and disruptions in the classroom. By viewing the world through the eyes of the child, teachers gather insights into a child's troubling behaviors. As I often remind my audiences, the pain that a troubled child causes is never greater than the pain that he feels. (pp. 38-39)

### Peer Mentoring

Because of IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) schools are required by law to include students with disabilities in regular classrooms. Peer Mentoring has been a successful vehicle for educators when trying to effectively deal with the inclusion of students with disabilities (Dopp & Block, 2004). General education teachers have found that peer mentoring it is an "effective way to teach communication and problem-solving skills" (2004, p. 57). The following is an example of how to implement a peer mentoring program (2004):

- Emphasize ongoing training of the peer leaders.
- Use hands-on activities to foster creativity.
- Practice problem-solving skills universally throughout the school.
- Incorporate discussion and review of previous lessons.
- Ask students to help create their own program.
- Encourage students with weak skills to become peer leaders.
- Include volunteer groups to help support appropriate social interaction. (p. 57)

Schools that have used peer mentoring have found that this program can effectively help all students benefit from inclusion and can also help strengthen students who display a weakness in specific skills such as social skills (2004).

## Integrated Play Group

Children with learning differences and disabilities often have a difficult time engaging in social activities with other children. It is important that schools recognize this characteristic among children with special needs. Lantz, Nelson, and Loftin (2004) write about a program titled Integrated Play Group Intervention. These authors reference the work of Wolfberg (1999) when stating the mission of IPG (integrated play group), “to provide a haven for children with diverse abilities to create genuine play worlds together, where they may reach their social and imaginative potential, as well as have fun and make friends”(p. 9). The groups were primarily designed to help children that have autistic disorders between the ages of 3-11.

The groups encompass the following “players”, guides who represent facilitators and are trained in working with children that have autistic disorders, expert players who are typical peers that possess good social behaviors, and novice players who have autistic spectrum disorders or other similar needs (Lantz, Nelson, and Loftin, 2004). The authors state the following benefits from using the IPG model to help children with specific disabilities:

Benefits to novice players include

- More frequent and sustained social interactions.
- Improved social language.
- Better quality of play (eg., more use of pretend and symbolic play).
- Larger play repertoires.
- The development of friendships

Benefits to other playgroup members include

- Better awareness and tolerance of children with disabilities.
- The development of empathy and caring attitudes toward children who are different.
- The development of friendships with children with disabilities.
- Improved self-esteem. (pp. 9-10).

This is just a glimpse of the many educational programs offered to benefit teachers and students. Dyson (2007) discusses in her dissertation how “professional development programs alone do not bring about teacher change, but it is the change in the classroom practices that lead to positive student outcomes which in turn produce a lasting impact on teachers’ beliefs” (p. 14). School leaders need to understand the importance of strong lasting education programs and especially those that will educate others about the world of learning differences. School leaders should also include and educate the parents when they implement a specific program within the school. If parents are not on board then the program could have difficulties taking off.

#### IMPORTANCE OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Due to the progression of special education and IDEA, it is now more important than ever that parents are involved in their child’s educational career. Spann, Kohler, and Soenksen (2003) state that “parents are now equal partners with school personnel, entitling them to access children’s school records and participate in the design and evaluation of special education services” (p. 228). Research has shown that parent participation leads to a multitude of positive outcomes for children who are receiving special education services. Spann, Kohler, and Soenksen (2003) reveal the following positive outcomes concerning parents who have children with special needs when they

are involved in the education process: “greater generalization and maintenance of treatment gain greater continuity in intervention programs, higher levels of parent satisfaction and more effective strategies for resolving problems” (p. 228).

During the early years of special education parents were often seen as the cause of their child’s disability. They were not thought of as partners in the educational experience. Muscott (2002) states that “Their voices were often muted by professionals who were more interested in assigning blame than listening to their hopes, fears, and dreams – or taking their advice”(p. 66). Since this thinking there has been a dramatic shift in that parents are now seen as experts on their children. They now are considered consultants and partners with the educators. Parents are no longer seen as passive viewers but as active participants.

Since the law mandates that parents and special educators collaborate about the decisions to be made concerning the educational program of the child, it is important that schools recognize how to successfully collaborate. School officials and special education teachers need to first of all understand that parents have needs like their child has needs. Parents often have the need for advice, support, information, and practical help when dealing with a child who has a learning disability (Russell, 2003). They also need support emotionally and intellectually when dealing with the different problems that arise from their situations. Muscott (2002) offers some good advice for schools to help build positive partnerships with parents:

- Exceptional partnerships respect the uniqueness of families.
- Exceptional partnerships understand that families go through common stages of coping after discovering they have a child with a disability.

- Exceptional partnerships understand the ways in which families cope and match strategies and resources accordingly.
- Exceptional partnerships are based on family-friendly schools that provide opportunities for maximum parental involvement.
- Exceptional partnerships should provide opportunities for parents to become involved in meaningful aspects of their child's education and the overall functioning of the school.(pp. 66-69)

For children with learning disabilities the support from a parent or someone in that role is essential. With the rights that parents have gained through IDEA 1997 and 2004 come responsibilities. Parents have the responsibility to share relevant information about their child with the school, and they have the responsibility to discuss with the teacher how to maximize the least restrictive environment for their child (Bauer and Shea, 2003). They should also monitor their child's progress and discuss problems that occur in assessment, placement, and on their Individualized Education Program (2003).

#### SUMMARY

To encourage parents to fulfill this responsibility schools should be open to their ideas and create an inviting culture for parents. Chapters IV and V will focus on families and their needs when a learning difference is present. Chapter IV reveals powerful data from interviews that define the needs of parents who have children with learning differences and how the Schools Attuned program impacted their family. Chapter V weaves the data together with the literature and gives schools recommendations as how to include parents and also how to help students and teachers when learning differences are present. This chapter will also include recommendations for further study and for



replication. Chapter III describes the methods which were used to acquire the data and will further discuss the methodologies used and the lens through which this study was conducted.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of my research, to examine what happens to families when they become engaged with the Schools Attuned Program, qualitative research proved most useful. While both research styles, qualitative and quantitative are of value, qualitative research allowed me to capture the points of views of the individuals being studied. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994) “Both qualitative and quantitative researchers are concerned about the individual’s point of view.” “However, qualitative investigators think they can get closer to the actor’s perspective through detailed interviewing and observation” (p. 5). According to Creswell (2005) qualitative is best used for “research problems in which you do not know the variables and need to explore” (p. 45). On the other hand, quantitative research is best used when answering “specific, narrow questions to obtain measurable and observable data on variables” (p. 47).

Detailed interviewing and participant observation are common techniques of qualitative research. Through qualitative interviewing the researcher can explore “new areas and discover and unravel intriguing puzzles” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 4). Qualitative research will allow the researcher to study the participants in their own natural setting and develop meaning through the interaction of the researcher and participant.

Throughout history, qualitative research has been “judged on whether the work communicates or ‘says’ something to us” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 6). A major tool of qualitative research methods is the ability to view the world objectively (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

### CRITICAL THEORY

This study has also been guided by critical theory. According to Freire (1998), “Teaching requires critical reflection” (p. xiii). The information gained through the interviews of parents who have children with learning disabilities will produce critical reflection from parents that will inform educators as a whole. The information and lived experiences gained from these interviews may inform teachers about a group of people who have suffered from educational discrimination in the past and possibly the present. Critical Theory aims not to state the obvious in a study but to find the underlying themes of oppression and attempt to understand what ideologies in society have caused this oppression. Through research studies such as this one, there is hope that educators can gain new knowledge when working with learning disabled children. As Freire (1998) states, “The future is something to be constructed through trial and error rather than inexorable vise that determines all our actions” (p. 54). Through human inquiries such as this research, justice is being served for a people who want to tell their stories of an educational experience whether good or bad. Once educators begin to understand the lived experiences of their students and parents, hopefully an attitude of democratic values will develop within the classrooms of our schools. Freire (1998) states the following concerning democratic values, “If I have made a choice for open-minded, democratic practice, then obviously this excludes reactionary, authoritarian, elitist attitudes and

actions. Under no circumstances, therefore, may I discriminate against a student” (p. 90). It takes an understanding of other people and their positions to develop this type of schooling. It takes someone who values listening.

### PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

While critical theory is the lens that informs this study, the methodology or the “pursuit of knowledge” is based upon phenomenological inquiry. Van Manen (1990) states that “Phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience” (p. 4). Phenomenology is a type of human science research that “is the explication of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness” (p. 9). Phenomenological inquiry looks at the human world and not natural objects. The human world has experiences and through phenomenological research, the researcher will “borrow other people’s experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience in the context of the whole human experience” (p. 62).

Willis (1991) points out that discovering other human experience may be difficult. He explains the specific methodology with the help of Van Manen in the following steps: “First, gather material from one’s own and other’s life-worlds. Second, discern the underlying structures in these materials. Third, formulate recommendations and orientations to practical action” (p. 181). Willis also states that “The life-worlds of all people have some things in common, the second step of the above methodology calls on the phenomenological inquirer to attempt to identify these things” (p. 182). Once the researcher has identified these things, commonalities will begin to surface among the

experiences of others. Willis ponders as to whether “the dynamics of individuals’ perceptual life-worlds fall into any patterns” (p. 183).

While many researchers have patterned their studies using phenomenological inquiry, Ehrich (2003) offers an example of using phenomenology as a methodology. Ehrich studied the unique experiences of principals and their relationship to professional development. She wanted an avenue to understand professional development outside the theories and specific frameworks. Ehrich (2003) states “A phenomenological methodology, therefore, guided the study and allowed the principals’ experiences to speak for themselves” (p. 42). As Ehrich studied principals, my research will focus on parents and their engagement with Schools Attuned. The program itself will not be studied but the unique experiences that parents of learning disabled children have encountered because of this program.

#### PROCEDURES AND TECHNIQUES

Van Manen (1990) refers to the procedures as “the various rules and routines associated with the practice of research” (p. 28). The procedures will include the method of selecting the parents for the study. Van Manen refers to techniques as “the virtually inexhaustible variety of theoretical and practical procedures that one can invent or adopt in order to work out a certain research method” (p. 28). Both the procedures and techniques guided my research question, “What happens to families when they become engaged with Schools Attuned Program?” According to Van Manen, “Every project of phenomenological inquiry is driven by a commitment of turning to an abiding concern” (p. 31). Education has always and will always be concerned with families and their educational engagement.

To investigate the research question mentioned above I chose to conduct interviews with my subjects. The interview served as the “dominant strategy” for my data collection. Van Manen (1990) describes how the interview serves very specific purposes in hermeneutic phenomenological human science:

1. it may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon, and
2. the interview may be used as a vehicle to develop a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience. (p. 6)

Interviews were not the only technique to gather data but the most important. The triangulation of data also included observation and collection of artifacts. The artifacts included any document or work sample that the parent felt appropriate to validate the experiences talked about during the interview. Observations of the participants were conducted during the interviews.

The procedures employed to pick the participants involved purposive sampling. According to Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen (1993), “Purposive and directed sampling through human instrumentation increases the range of data exposed and maximizes the researcher’s ability to identify emerging themes that take adequate account of contextual conditions and cultural norms” (p. 82). Patton (2002) states, “The logic and power of purposeful sampling derive from the emphasis on in-depth understanding. This leads to information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance

to the purpose of the research” (p. 46). Through purposive sampling I chose participants who are engaged in Schools Attuned and who have a child with a learning disability.

The method by which the participants were chosen was through snowball sampling. Patton (2002) describes snowball sampling as follows:

This is an approach for locating information-rich key informants or critical cases. The process begins by asking well-situated people: “Who knows a lot about \_\_\_\_\_? Whom should I talk to?” By asking a number of people who else to talk with the snowball gets bigger and bigger as you locate new information rich cases. (p. 237)

Through snowball sampling the group of participants will most likely be a homogeneous group. This factor is a good thing in my study. My research only applies to parents of learning disabled children who are engaged in the Schools Attuned Program. The parents should also be knowledgeable that their child is receiving Schools Attuned instruction and assistance. Snowball sampling limited my study to only these parents. I am not interested in parents who are not engaged in Schools Attuned or have children that are part of the mainstream regular education plan. I have a set criteria and that is why this type of purposive sampling fits this particular study. As Rubin and Rubin (2005) state, “Finding interviewees with the relevant, first-hand experience is critical in making your results convincing” (p. 65).

The interview participants were from a city located in north Texas. The school with which the parents are involved is a private school that only enrolls children with learning disabilities. Because of time and scheduling it is almost impossible to set up a time convenient for both parents so usually one parent was interviewed. “Mountain

School's" academic program is for students grades two through twelve. One of the requirements for candidates seeking to enroll in this school is to show evidence of a learning difference. Mountain School is "designed especially for different learners" (*A different school for different learners*, 2006, p.1). The following are listed by Mountain School as traditional roadblocks that their students have faced in traditional schools:

- Difficulty in reading words or numbers
- Problems transferring thoughts to paper,
- Trouble with organization and time management,
- Failure to turn in homework,
- Inability to concentrate in class,
- History of falling behind classmates academically. (*A different school for different learners*, 2006, p. 1)

The majority of the teachers of Mountain School have been trained through the Schools Attuned Program and use it throughout their class instruction.

The sample size of participants was 10 individual parents. Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993), hold, "The basic rule is, 'there are no rules for sample size.' In qualitative research one is looking more for quality, more for information richness than information volume" (p. 83-84). Once this was achieved the interviews stopped. Many of the interviews were revisited by a follow-up interview to clarify information or gain a better insight to the first interview. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The rules of informed consent and confidentiality were followed. The participants were given a consent form that had been signed before the interview began. The interviews were recorded on an audio recorder. I am the only individual who had access to the



information given from these recordings. After the interview, I personally transcribed each interview. A draft of the transcribed interview was given to each participant for a member check. Through the member check the participants read the transcribed interview and made any changes or added information they felt appropriate. Once I received the transcription back from the participants I made all changes to the original transcription.

### THEME ANALYSIS

After gathering the information from the interviews and transcribing each interview I conducted thematic analysis as described by Van Manen to guide the interviews and discuss the findings. Van Manen (1990) describes thematic analysis as “the process of recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work” (p. 78). He goes on to state that “Phenomenological themes may be understood as the structures of experience. So when we analyze a phenomenon, we are trying to determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up that experience” (p. 79). Once the themes were identified they gave control and order to the actual writing of the information gained.

The emerging themes are then arranged thematically and divided into sections. Under the sections were subthemes that discuss a theme in greater detail. The data drove the subjects of the themes, and similar data in other interview transcriptions was sought. Van Manen (1990) states that when writing analytically and reconstructing life stories or in selecting anecdotes it is important “to be careful to include only material that illustrates or highlights a theme. And this theme becomes the hermeneutic tool by way of which the phenomenon under study can be meaningfully understood” (p. 170).

## QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS

As discussed by Rubin and Rubin (2005) the interview should begin with broad questions and then narrow in on what is being said by the participant. Eisner (1991) states that “Interviews need not-indeed, should not-be formal, questionnaire-oriented encounters. The aim is for the interviewer to put the person at ease, to have some sense of what he or she wants to know, but not be either rigid or mechanical in method” (p. 183). For this reason all participants were not asked the same questions but they followed the same type of guidelines such as beginning with the same broad question. Then as the conversation became deeper other questions emerged. The following questions were my guide as I interviewed the participants. These questions have been modified from the literature as to how to evaluate efforts to engage parents:

What is your relationship like with your child’s teacher?

How do you help your child learn at home?

How do you describe your child to his/her teacher?

Describe your involvement with Schools Attuned.

How do you find out from the school what they expect from you as a parent?

How do you express your feelings to the school what you expect from you child socially and academically?

What behavioral changes have you noticed from your child and your family as a whole since being engaged with Schools Attuned? (Bauer and Shea, 2003)

## TRUSTWORTHINESS

The trustworthiness and credibility of the data and analysis were offered by the researcher by triangulation of data, prolonged engagement, and peer debriefing. The triangulation as discussed above included the interviews, collection of artifacts, and observation of participants throughout the interviews.

The prolonged engagement the researcher had with the culture of the school and interview participants is discussed in further detail at the beginning of chapter four. The idea of prolonged engagement is that the researcher should spend enough time in the culture being studied that would allow the researcher “to understand daily events in the way that persons who are part of that culture interpret them”(Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 30). The time spent should help the researcher overcome any distortions he/she might have.

Peer debriefing helps the researcher see the data through another pair of eyes. The data was also analyzed by two other educators besides the researcher. The two other educators are retired professors, one has her master’s degree in science education and the other holds his Ph.D. in history. Both individuals were debriefed about the research and asked to help with the theme analysis.

Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) have done much research on trustworthiness and state the following that the researcher must consider for their data to be credible:

If intellectual inquiry is to have an impact on human knowledge, either by adding to an overall body of knowledge or by solving a particular problem, it must guarantee some measure of credibility about what is has inquired, must

communicate in a manner that will enable application by its intended audience and must enable its audience to check on its findings and the inquiry process by which the findings were obtained. (p.28)

In the following chapter, the research results are analyzed and reported.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

As explained in chapter III, the data collected from the interviews was thoroughly examined. The transcription of the interview data was labor intensive. The goal of the interviews was to explore the life stories of families that are engaged with Schools Attuned. As Van Manen (1990) states, “Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (p. 9). Through reading the interviews and developing themes from these interviews I have begun to understand a deeper meaning to a human experience that is so relevant today, the phenomenon of families who have children with learning differences.

This chapter is divided into four sections:

- Description of the Mountain School
- Researcher interaction with the school, its community, and the interview participants
- Descriptions and biographies of participants
- Major emergent themes (derived from the study, plus sub-themes)
- Theme #1 – Parents’ struggles before Schools Attuned (frustrations, guilt, exhaustion, exclusion, and social stigmas).

- Theme #2 – Transformation as a result of Schools Attuned
  - Parents
  - Students
  - Home life
  - Financial life
  
- Theme # 3 – Schools Attuned driving the school culture
  - Acceptance of both parents and students
  - Empowered partnership, how the school and home work together.
  - Hope for the future.

#### DESCRIPTION OF MOUNTAIN SCHOOL

Mountain School was founded in 1973 and is a private school offering academic instruction, including fine arts and athletics. The school currently has two fully accredited campuses located in the North Texas area. The school location in which I as a researcher did most of my work houses approximately 225 students; grades 2-12. The elementary section is composed of grades 1-6, the middle school is grades 7-8 and the high school is grades 9-12. Mountain School describes itself as “an optimal educational environment for students who learn differently, and who are of average or above average intelligence” (“Vision,” n.d., para. 1.) Most of the students at Mountain School have been diagnosed with dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, ADD, ADHD, auditory processing disorders, and other learning hurdles (“Vision,” n.d.). Some of the students do not have a specific diagnosed learning difference but have chosen Mountain School because of the class sizes and a more individualized setting.

The setting where I did most of my research has approximately 35 teachers and consists of a 7:1 teacher/student ratio. All of the teachers have been trained in the Schools Attuned Program. The Mountain School is a National Schools Attuned Exemplary School. This campus has five nationally trained Schools Attuned facilitators, provides parent workshops and educational programs, and incorporates tools for working with individual students and the entire class (Mountain School power point, November 26, 2007). An example of educational programs offered at the Mountain School include enrichment programs such as integrated instruction for reading, math, and language arts; reading comprehension strategies; math basic skills; learning about learning; and SAT prep: strategies for Success. These programs were included in the Summer 2007 academic and enrichment opportunities for students (“Mountian Highlights,” n.d.). Mountain School not only offers educational programs for students but also for parents or caregivers. I attended one of the meetings at Mountain School and the objective of the gathering was educating parents how to help their child become organized at home and how to develop workable homework strategies.

The vision of this school is to instruct individuals to become the best they can be. Schools Attuned has been the vehicle in which they can develop the minds of children and transform them into successful learners. The following statement defines how the school instructs individual students: (“Vision,” n.d),

Mountain School has adopted the Schools Attuned concepts of Dr. Mel Levine, founder of the All Kinds of Minds Institute. These methods help us identify the way the child processes information. By identifying recurrent themes in the learning and performance, we are able to create an

individualized management plan for each child. The student gains insight and language to more effectively deal with strengths and weaknesses.

Curriculum and instructional practices incorporate a variety of activities to accommodate learning differences. In essence, the school adapts instructional methods to the child's learning style. (para. 2)

The school focuses on all aspects of the student's life. Those aspects include the student's intellectual, emotional, social and physical development ("Vision," n.d. ). The Mountain School focuses on "strengths, a commitment to the individual learner, accommodations for learning and testing, class placement based on learning profile, specially trained/educated teachers, and a positive and encouraging environment" (Mountain School, Power Point November, 26).

The elementary classes at Mountain School foster good citizenship, respect for others and responsible behavior. The core of the elementary academic goals is language arts – listening, speaking, reading, and writing ("Academics," n.d.). The middle school emphasizes the teaching of respect, responsibility, self-discipline and accountability. The curriculum involves study, organization, time management, decision-making, problem-solving and critical thinking skills. The academics side includes an integrated language arts block which consists of reading, English, vocabulary, and written expression. Other disciplines include mathematics, social studies, science, physical education, computer instruction, art, and music. Aside from the academic curriculum, Mountain School also offers extracurricular activities that include athletics and theater productions ("Academics," n.d.).



Mountain School provides a place for children who learn differently. The staff at Mountain School seem to take their job very seriously by trying their best to challenge and develop students who will be successful. While many of the Mountain students began their educational journey in the public school setting, they needed something more than what their public school was offering. The students at Mountain face a variety of challenges that became a stumbling block in the public school system. Some of those challenges are as follows (“A different school for different learners,” n.d),

- Difficulty in reading words or numbers,
- Problems transferring thought to paper,
- Trouble with organization and time management,
- Failure to turn in homework,
- Inability to concentrate in class,
- History of falling behind classmates academically. (p. 1)

Because Mountain School provides such a caring, educational, atmosphere for their students, they successfully graduate over 80% of their high school seniors who have continued their education at colleges and universities (“Mountain Highlights,” n.d.).

#### CONNECTING WITH INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

The ten participants that I interviewed from Mountain School are parents that I will never forget. All of the parents have children with learning differences. The parents were so open and honest with me, I feel that I connected with each and every one of them. I gained a great deal of respect for these parents and the fight they have fought for their children’s education. All of the participants had one thing in common. They all loved their children and wanted them to be successful academically and socially.

Through my interviews and interactions with the participants I developed a relationship with them, the school, and many of the staff. I knew only one participant before the study began. Through this study I reconnected with her thus leading to many other connections and friendships.

I went on several tours of the school to learn about the physical structure and the curriculum. Because of these tours I met some of the teachers and observed them teaching their classes. Before beginning the interviews I went through the Schools Attuned training myself. The initial training was not held at the Mountain School but at the North Texas Learning Center. Through this training I became acquainted with the staff at the North Texas Learning Center and one of the Mountain School teachers who was my facilitator.

On one occasion when I was conducting an interview at the Mountain School I met an interview participant in the gymnasium. She was orchestrating a Booster Club garage sale. After our interview I met her co-worker and she had such an interesting story about her own child that I wanted to interview her. I came back the next day and brought items to sell in the garage sale. The two moms were extremely thankful for my donations. It felt good to be able to help the Booster Club raise money for the Mountain School athletics.

Throughout the interviews many parents would allude to the parent educational meetings that the Mountain School would offer. I wanted to know more about these meetings so I attended a parent education night. At this meeting I met many parents and listened to their stories of success and failures of their own children.

I attended and spoke at a college recruitment day for the Mountain School representing my alma mater, Oklahoma Christian University. Oklahoma Christian has started a program titled The Bridge Program that enables students with learning differences to get the extra help and skills necessary to complete college. This program is in its infancy years but has been quite successful thus far. Because of this program one of my interview participants wanted to invite Oklahoma Christian to the Mountain School in hopes of recruiting some of the students. The event consisted of an informational meeting of parents, a dinner in the home of the interview participant which brought together Oklahoma Christian staff and Mountain School staff. The final activity was a recruitment day for the high school aged students at Mountain. At this event I spoke to the student body and told them of my experiences at Oklahoma Christian.

Not long after the college recruitment day at Mountain School I traveled with two of the Mountain School teachers and the executive director of Mountain to Oklahoma Christian. There we met the interview participant that spearheaded this event. We met with a few of Oklahoma Christian's academic administrators to give advice and opinions of the Bridge program and to also learn about the program and the good work it is doing for Oklahoma Christian. This experience was beneficial for me in that I learned more about Mountain School and how higher education learning facilities are also incorporating more options for students that have learning differences.

All of these activities that I have discussed happened in fall of 2007. In December of 2008 I attended a follow-up practicum for the Schools Attuned program. The practicum was held at Mountain School. During this activity I connected with a few of the Mountain School teachers who were also participating in the practicum. It was most

helpful for me to visit with them about their students and how they adjust the curriculum to meet the needs of their students. During this practicum I interacted with one of the teachers who also had a daughter that was enrolled at Mountain. I interviewed her at a later time. It was so interesting to hear her talk from a teacher's point of view and also from a parent's point of view. She has seen both sides of the story; the concern of a teacher helping children with learning differences and the heartache a parent goes through when having a child who has a learning difference.

During the spring of 2008 I attended my last activity with Mountain School. I was invited to a graduation reception for the child of one of my interview participants. At this reception I visited with many of the staff members from Mountain School and a few of the interview participants. At the reception I also enjoyed visiting with a few of the Mountain School students. It was a wonderful event, filled with accomplishment and anticipation of what the future might hold. After the reception I attended the graduation ceremony of the Mountain School. The commencement exercises were just beautiful. Just as any other graduation ceremony, there was a charge to the graduates, speeches by two Valedictorians, a poem to the seniors, and the presentation of the graduates. The two speeches given by the valedictorians were bold and confident. By saying this I mean that these students felt ready to conquer the world. They mentioned in their speech that Mountain School taught them how to learn independently and how to use the tools needed to be successful at the university level. I was inspired by the speeches and how these students had overcome challenges throughout their educational journey. Even though they hit roadblocks along the way, they didn't give up and they completed their secondary schooling years.

As I was reading about the students in the Mountain School commencement program, a theme that kept reoccurring was one of accomplishment and talent. Academics was not the only topic discussed in the writings of the students, but social, athletic, community service, and musical opportunities as well. The parents that wrote the writings about their graduating child offered gratitude of thanks to the Mountain school teachers and staff. This gratitude was not only present in the written program but in all of the interviews that I conducted. There was a common feeling with all of the interview participants, a sense that someone truly cared about their child. That someone was a teacher or staff member at Mountain School.

All of the activities that I participated in aside from the actual interviews made me a better researcher. As Moustakas (1990) states, “Through exploratory open-ended inquiry, self-directed search, and immersion in active experience, one is able to get inside the question, become one with it, and thus achieve an understanding of it” (p. 15). I did gain a deeper meaning of the lives of my participants through exploring their lives. When listening to the interviews I was able to grasp and visualize the words coming from their mouths. As Crotty (1998) tells us that “Phenomenology, however, invites us to do it. It requires us to engage with phenomena in our world and make sense of them directly and immediately.”(p. 79) I did as Crotty stated; I engaged in the world of the Mountain School as best I could. I took every opportunity given to me to identify with the parents and the ideals of the Mountain School. I am grateful to the Mountain School for recognizing the importance of my study.

## DESCRIPTION OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

All of the interview participants had a child(ren) at Mountain School. The number of participants totaled 10. Eight of the participants were the moms and two were the dads. I interviewed nine white parents and one African American parent.

All of the participants reside in the North Texas area. All of them discussed the hurdles that their children have overcome to be successful students. The parents were honest and open with me. They seemed interested in my study and wanted to read the final copy, my dissertation. The first two participants were chosen from a list given to me by the executive director of Mountain School. After these interviews I began meeting other parents and gathered additional interview names from teachers or the participants themselves. In effect it was the “snowball” method of finding interview participants. After the interviews and the member checks were completed, I mailed each interview participant a letter asking them to write a self-descriptive biography and also to answer a simple question, “Why do you like Schools Attuned?” I received 6 out of 10 responses back and one participant called and we discussed the questions verbally. As I describe the participants I will use the exact biography and answers given to me, with the exception of changing names so the participants will not be identified. Some of the biographies were given to me in outline form which was changed to narrative form by the researcher. A few of the biographies are summarized by the researcher because the letter was never returned with their own self-descriptive biography. The summary was taken from the information in the actual interview.

## Interview Participant #1 - Shannon

My first interview took place in the home of a Mountain School parent that will be called Shannon. Her home was so unique because of its character. It is a beautiful restored home that exudes a welcome feeling to those that enter. It is always buzzing with activity. Shannon opens up her home frequently to guests, groups, dinner occasions, and so many other countless functions. Shannon was an elementary school teacher before having children. Shannon has four children and three of those children attend Mountain School. Shannon and her husband believe that doors can be opened from a sound education. Shannon presides on various educational boards and is very generous in giving to educational institutions.

Shannon's first son, P.J. was born prematurely at 34 weeks. Within the first two hours of P.J.'s birth there were medical problems present. His lungs were not fully developed and he was battling respiratory problems. P.J. finally did get to leave the hospital and his progress was looking positive up until 18 months of age. Shannon took him to a pediatric developmentalist and heard the words that she never thought she would hear, cerebral palsy. After hearing these words she became angry and went through a phase of denial. She states the following about how she felt with this diagnosis, "You wonder why you are in these places because you think that these things are only going to happen to women who have drug abuse issues, who were too poor to get prenatal care, this doesn't happen to college educated people."

Throughout P.J.'s infant years, Shannon did a demanding job helping P.J. develop physically, emotionally, and cognitively. She discussed in her interview how she would crawl on the floor with P.J. to stimulate his crawling and also to help him rotate into a

sitting up position. Shannon states, "P.J's crawl was not like a crawl you have seen. He did the combat crawl and you don't often see that in babies. He didn't rotate and sit the way healthy children do. He would push up into a W to sit." At that time Shannon had two other children, an older daughter and a younger son when she was trying to help P.J. as much as possible. When P.J. entered the first grade in the public school system, Jason (P.J.'s younger brother) entered kindergarten also in the public school system. Shannon started to notice some differences in Jason than she had never noticed in her first child, Kerrie. Shannon discussed the following regarding Jason:

Because of all of the demands of P.J, I knew Jason wasn't like his sister Kerrie. He wasn't developing quite like her in the language area. Language was difficult for him and he was a very, very cranky baby. Very cranky. He seemed the most happy when he was out in the car going places. He was just hard to get contented although I was doing all this infant stimulation; looking back I may have been over stimulating not knowing that this was a child that had attention deficit.

Shannon did find out that Jason's soft palate didn't develop correctly in utero. He did undergo extensive speech therapy during his first grade year.

After finding Mountain School and enrolling P.J. in the school, Shannon believed that Jason would also benefit from such a school as Mountain. Jason made a visit to Mountain School and the staff said, "Yes, indeed he could benefit." Within six weeks of Jason attending Mountain School, one of the highly respected teachers commented to Shannon that she thought Jason might have some attention difficulties. At that time the teacher presented Shannon a list of doctors that might help Jason. Again Shannon didn't take the statement from Jason's teacher very well.



I fussed with her and said what is wrong with America? That we are wanting to medicate all of our children; the Europeans are not doing this, what is wrong with America? Well, here I am saying this to a British woman (the teacher) and she said to me, well I just believe it was all those Europeans that had the get up and go and that is why there is so many of them here. And you know what, the more I thought about that, you think about it and having a grandmother who is an immigrant who came to this country in 1907, came through Ellis Island and the courage it took for that family to get on that boat. Think about it. Oh that theory makes a lot of sense. A lot of sense.

Before taking Jason to see a medical professional, Shannon talked with the teacher about giving Jason some time in the nurturing environment of Mountain School. She explained to his teacher that “He had been neglected for a year with his brother, worried about his brother, he had seen a very crippled brother learn to walk again and walk well. Then dad commuting for that year, me being away from the home so much, let’s just give him time in this nurturing environment.”

After some time, Shannon finally did pursue taking Jason to a medical professional; she took him to a psychiatrist. At the consultation with the psychiatrist Shannon learned that Jason was suffering with depression and was suicidal but didn’t have a plan to carry through with the suicidal thoughts. Ultimately the psychiatrist diagnosed Jason with generalized anxiety. Treating the depression was a great help for Jason but the treatment was not helping with the attention problem. Again Jason’s teacher told Shannon about the problems in the class with attention, and Shannon responded by getting help for that as well. The medications prescribed for Jason coupled with the

training of Jason's teacher led to an amazing year for Jason. Shannon emphasizes this in the following statement, "I mean you put Mountain School with these teachers who are so well trained in neurological function and strategies for helping children with attention, he just soared. His writing changed unbelievably."

Throughout the interview with Shannon there were so many emotions visible. We both cried and laughed together. Shannon truly believes that this program and the Mountain School acting as one unit rescued her two boys and opened doors for them academically and socially that may have remained closed. Shannon used the saying in her interview that "No individual builds anything worthwhile by his efforts alone." She expressed a deep amount of gratitude towards the Mountain School faculty and staff. Shannon states the following about Schools Attuned and Mountain School, "They let you dream. They let you dream there. It has totally shaped our lives."

#### Interview Participant # 2 - Kim

My second interview participant will be called Kim. As in my interview with Shannon I met Kim at her residence. Her home was also very welcoming. The setting was a beautiful custom built house, much like a home you would see in the mountains of Colorado. I was met at the door by a cute happy Schnauzer. The living room where Kim and I visited reminded me of a ski lodge. Adorning the room were beautiful pictures of Kim and her family. The house exemplified a happy home. Fall decorations lined the living area; I felt comfortable and at ease. Kim is very involved in her children's lives. Many parents call Kim when they want to know what is going on at Mountain School. This was obvious because the phone rang several times while we were visiting. Kim is someone that parents can depend upon. Following is the biography written by Kim.

*I have been married to Tom for 25 years and we're amazed that we're still crazy about each other! We met in high school, but didn't begin dating until halfway through college. Tom is a mechanical engineer specializing in aircraft design, and recently took a Program Leader position with Rolls Royce Liberty Works creating jet engines. This took us from North Texas where we'd lived for 28 years to Ohio. So, there's much we're learning and experiencing for the first time (like cool weather in July). Our son David is 20 years old and is a Third Class Petty Officer in the US Navy, stationed aboard the submarine USS ALABAMA in Bangor, Washington. He graduated with honors from high school, enlisted, and graduated from the Naval Nuclear Power Training Command in 2008. It was hard having him leave home so completely at age 18. We're still trying to adjust to the distance between us.*

*Teri, our 17-year-old, is about to begin her junior year of high school in a new city where she knows no one. This makes her nervous to think about the first day, but she makes friends quickly and loves meeting new people, so we think she'll settle in fine. She's our child with learning "differences" which give her social difficulties sometimes and cognitive problems with inductive and deductive reasoning. Applied "everyday" math is also a struggle for her.*

*Tom and I were married for five years before having children, and I was employed as a Systems Analyst, having earned a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration in Systems Analysis in 1984. I had lettered in speech and drama for four years in high school and majored in drama for two years at college, but decided I didn't want the arts as my profession. When taking a computer-programming course, I felt it*

*was similar to solving puzzles, which is also a love of mine, so I changed my course of study.*

*Although I worked full-time for the first three years we had David, I resigned to be at home with my children once Teri was born. She had chronic (but minor) health problems from the beginning. Whether it was issues with her formula, ear infections, strabismus in either eyes, or constant bladder infections, we were unceasingly at the doctors' offices. When she was five, we discovered she had a "horseshoe kidney," which means her kidneys were conjoined. A four-hour surgery when she was six corrected this problem, and many of her other physical maladies subsided as well.*

*But in her toddler days, we also began to deal with developmental delays. I recorded "first words" at about 11-12 months, but at the same time, Tom began a new job in another state and left us for 10 straight weeks. She stopped talking altogether and we were referred to a speech pathologist at age two and a half years. Real talking didn't begin until age three and a half years. This experience was just the first of referrals, testing, and an assortment of acronyms like ARD, IEP, CAPD, CIPD, CA, MA, EMR, and of course, LD.*

*I have a few basic principles for living which experiences with Teri have taught me. The first is answering the question, "What tires can we put down?" I once saw a runner increase his leg strength by running while dragging a tire tied to him, but he said just one was enough. Granted, he could still run with two, but they wore him down. Activities are the "tires" we tie to ourselves. Teri doesn't have the capacity others do to handle commitments like lessons, sports practice, art lessons, social activities, and household chores. I'm always looking for systems, tricks, tips, and other assists to make*

*learning easier for her. For example, remembering textbooks is a “mental tire.” Is it possible to buy an extra set of books for the house, so she doesn’t have to remember which ones to bring home? In a larger sense, parents should refrain children from picking up another activity just because they can still get everything done by bedtime.*

*Related to putting down “tires,” is another principle: “Find your own pace.” We all have expectations from outside influences that impose goals and progress towards them. Watching Teri struggle to learn something, and my resulting stress when she fell behind her peers, I had to let go of the need to “keep up with the parade.” Many times, I’ve felt that we’ve watched others move ahead without us. But, in that, we’ve cast off the stress of operating on someone else’s clock, and slowed things down to a manageable pace. This resulted in “feel good” learning...enjoying our mastery of new thought instead of being enslaved in the constant pursuit.*

*Lastly, is my belief that it’s important to “take the long-term view.” I’ve told parents “Don’t get exasperated because he belches at the table. You’ve got 18 years to get the etiquette lessons learned. You want everything in by prom night.” In other words, we shouldn’t work on mastering all skills all the time. An elephant must be eaten one bite at a time, so some parts are eaten first. We need to work on only our top two or three priorities until fairly well mastered or we’ll be overwhelmed by our incapability.*

*Becoming Teri’s mother has been a “divine” way to teach me important life lessons. By nature, I want to be at the top of the group and I’m equipped and motivated to get there. But, over the last 17 years, I’ve learned that being at the top adds nothing to one’s character or value to society. Rather, it’s the quality of progress in one’s climb to any station in life that does.*

*At the risk of being overdramatic, experiencing Dr. Mel Levine's Schools Attuned was akin to the hymn lyrics, "(We) once were lost, but now (are) found." Our lives before Schools Attuned (SA) were spent wandering through a wilderness of diagnosticians, service providers, assessments, analyses, protocols, methodologies, therapies, exercises, and frustrations that stood between our daughter's success and self-esteem, and despair. Looking at the Schools Attuned schematic describing the eight Neurodevelopment constructs and their characteristics was like finding the map in an amusement park with a large, red "X" and the words "You are Here."*

*I've told other parents just beginning their "carnival ride" that there is no logical way to learn what is happening inside their child's head. I tell them to just start somewhere, find a diagnostician of some ilk, take whatever that professional offers them, keep what they find useful, file the rest under "maybe," and keep looking. I tell them to talk with as many other parents of LD children as they can, listening for experiences that are similar to their own, and thus "sniff out" additional places to look for answers.*

*Unfortunately, this plan can cannibalize precious amounts of time (school terms wait for no man), money (diagnosticians, therapies, and private schools never come cheap), and hope (perhaps this is the one...). We spent six years looking for the insight our daughter needed to engage the world successfully.*

*For her fifth grade year, we moved her to the Mountain School where they had recently adopted the Schools Attuned protocols. Dr. Levine was just becoming known in households as "the man on Oprah who talked about successful learning for special education kids." At that time, I didn't know what Schools Attuned was, but I knew it was working in other places and that meant hope; not just for Teri but for our entire family.*

*Schools Attuned became our tool for naming our daughter's challenges, understanding their effects, and developing strategies to strengthen or cope with her deficits. I liken this to the military premise that "One cannot fight an enemy one does not know." For example, she no longer has unspecific "memory problems." Now, we identify the five types of memory, the situations where they challenge her, and techniques for coping. Even our extended families are at ease knowing more specifically what their granddaughter faces when confronting a new situation. Thus, School Attuned allows us to demystify her learning differences, allowing others to no longer think of her as merely "slow."*

*Another blessing of Schools Attuned was an atmosphere of normalcy. Since Mountain School was exclusively for students with learning differences, it was normal to be different there. But because of the philosophy of attuning a child to her challenges and deficiencies, she began to discuss her challenges in a matter-of-fact way, and became self-secure knowing she is not "weird." Thus, she put those around her more at ease. Schools Attuned views learning challenged students no more differently than those who need glasses to see the chalkboard clearly, and its coping strategies no more unusual than giving a child a paint stick to hold a book's place on the library shelf.*

*That sense of normalcy eased tensions in all the relationships between my husband, our son, our daughter, and me. We all began to see her unique mind, and what behaviors were within her capacity, and which would need to come later. This lessened the feeling of disappointment we were subtly expressing because she wasn't "acting her age" or conforming to our family's norm.*

*Again, at the risk of sounding overdramatic, Schools Attuned was the departure point for our journey to loving and celebrating our daughter just the way she is, allowing the rest of the world to love her just the way she is and, most importantly, letting her love herself just the way she is.*

#### Interview Participant # 3 - Harriett

The setting for the interview with Harriett was at the Mountain School library. Harriett and I sat at a table in the corner of the library. Mountain School has a very nice library with a variety of books and other resources. Harriett is a frequent volunteer at the library. I enjoyed my conversation with Harriett and observed her calmness and confidence as we visited. She seems to be a very good mother and wants what is best for her son. She is involved in the parent education programs at Mountain and at the time of our interview Harriett was on the PTO board in charge of coordinating these programs. She told me about a variety of activities that she helps coordinate for the school; a few of them are organizing a panel of former students and parents to come and talk to the parents about “life after Mountain.” She also brings in speakers to address topics such as “web safety” and also asks a police officer to come and talk to the parents.

Harriett has one son who will be called Addison. Before Harriett discovered Mountain School she read the book *One Mind at a Time* by Levine. She was intrigued by this book because the idea of the book was that kids and people learn in different ways and that schools should be attuned to that idea.

At the same time as reading this book Harriett and her husband were very concerned with their son Addison who was falling further and further behind in the public school he was attending. Harriett states, “They didn’t seem to be willing to put, to give



him the attention that he needed or were unable to give him the attention that he needed.” Harriett goes on to say that, “Because of the larger class sizes and because of the state’s requirement preparing for the TAKS test, it all seemed to be detrimental to his education.” Harriett began looking around for other schooling options. She talked with a Montessori School and the head master or principal recommended that she have Addison tested by a private diagnostician. After Addison was evaluated the diagnostician recommended some schools to Harriett for Addison, and Mountain School was one of them.

After the test and evaluation Harriett put Addison back in the public school and forgot about pursuing private schools. Harriett discusses that, “Things at first seemed to be ok but then it started deteriorating. Once I got material from Mountain I did a little bit of reading about and found out that they were with the Schools Attuned.” Addison started school at Mountain at the beginning of his fourth grade year. Addison had been diagnosed with Autism. Harriett stated that, “He is very concrete and he looks at things very discretely which is probably why he has problems with math because it is hard for him to see that  $2+3=5$  and  $3+2=5$ . That is really the same problem but to him that is two different problems. So he has that kind of thinking but it is again one of those things he will develop at his pace. He has to learn, it doesn’t become instinctive to him, but he will eventually learn. It takes a lot of showing him and reinforcement I guess?”

Harriett discusses in her interview how Schools Attuned trains Addison’s teachers to deal with differences in the classroom. Harriett states that “I feel like here there really is a focus on a second way.”

#### Interview Participant #4 - Robin

I met Robin on the Mountain School campus in a conference room. The conference room was located in the central office at Mountain. Robin is the PTO president and has two boys that attend Mountain School. She is very involved in her boys' education and personally knows all of their teachers. Robin was an educator herself so she understands the demands of education. As I observed her conversing with the Mountain School office staff, the staff all seems to know Robin and respect her as the PTO president. Following is the biography written by Robin.

*I am the youngest of four and was born and raised in North Texas. Both of my parents were teacher/coaches and that is the professional path I took as well. After graduating from a school district in North Texas I headed east to Ursinus College in Collegeville, PA where I majored in Health and Physical Education and received my B.S. in 1979. My first job was in San Antonio, Texas, at St. Mary's Hall as Athletic Director and teacher/coach. San Antonio was not my cup of tea so I was happy to move back to North Texas when H. offered me a job teaching in the Physical Education Department. I truly enjoyed working with kids and loved coaching (especially soccer) but grew tired of the politics and pushy wealthy parents that I was still too young to handle.*

*My husband and I had our first wonderful son in December, 1988, and our second in April of 1992. I have been a stay at home mom for their whole lives and been very involved with their schools' parent organizations at each institution.*

*I am an avid mystery reader, a movie buff, a dog lover, and family oriented person. I appreciate organization and people who are dependable. I would rather be with my kids, husband, and dogs than anywhere else on the globe. And I can be relatively*

*funny at times but also a bit intimidating, I believe. I think I'm somewhat like asparagus – you either really like me or can't stand me, or at least, that's how I see it.*

*I like Schools Attuned simply because of what it is – schools being attuned to the students! Now that my family has been a part of this attitude and programming, I'm amazed a person thrives any other way. People are so very different and have such different abilities – this philosophy strives to best channel those abilities and develop the entire student – not just the “cookie cutter” parts that are one size fits all. My sons are unique, as are every mothers' sons; this program was simply the best way for my two boys to embrace their uniqueness, not struggle with it.*

#### Interview Participant #5 - Tony

I met with Tony at his home. Tony has two children and both of them were at home during our conversation. Tony is an engineer and from the interview, it is evident that Tony wants to be involved in his children's education. We talked in his study where the wall was decorated with a cuckoo clock that made the coolest noises and also on the walls were he and his wife's college degrees. After our conversation I looked at pictures of Gary (Tony's son that attends Mountain School) and his friends on Tony's computer. There were also pictures of the Mountain School, teachers at the school and other parents who send their children to Mountain School. It was an enjoyable time talking to Tony and visiting with Gary. Following is the biography written by Tony.

*I was born in Arcadia, CA but mainly raised in H. since second grade. I lived in Brazil for three years as my father was a missionary there. I am the second of three children; I have an older sister and a younger brother. I was raised Church of Christ and*

*have a strong faith. I was baptized at the age of 15 while attending summer camp. I was also very active in my youth group.*

*I was educated in the public school system and attended kindergarten and first grade in Brazil. I graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering in 1985. I graduated summa cum laude. I then went on and completed my M.S. in Engineering Management and graduated summa cum laude 4.0 from the University of Texas at Arlington. I am a mechanical engineer at B. Helicopter and have worked there since June of 1985. I am currently Chief of Rotor Blade Design and manage 20 employees.*

*I met my wife, Abbie in college and married her in 1987; we have been married for 21 years. We have two children, Katie who is a senior in high school, and Gary who is a fourth grader at Mountain School.*

*My wife, Abbie has been a full time homemaker since Katie's birth. She works part time at a church preschool and also owns a very small business as a pooper scooper in our housing community. She has a B.B.A. in Marketing and graduated in 1985. She was not raised as a member of the Church but was baptized at the age of 19, because I shared my faith with her.*

*I don't have much spare time as work is very hectic and my children take up much of my time outside of work. I enjoy riding mountain bikes on trails. I am active as Akela (adult advisor) with Gary in Cub Scouts. We really enjoy camping together. I am very interested in meteorology and I follow weather patterns closely. I am fascinated by storms and tornadoes. I share this interest with my daughter; we would both like to be tornado chasers!*

*Abbie and I love to travel, when time and money are permitting. I have been to Taiwan, Canada, Japan with work. I need to go to Australia and New Zealand with work but have no time to go there for business/pleasure! I love to fix anything that is broken and I can fix anything! I enjoy the challenge and take pride in the accomplishment. I enjoy swimming with my family in our backyard pool, especially with Gary in the evenings. I am a deacon over the grounds ministry where I attend church.*

*I am a perfectionist which is both a strength and a weakness. I can explain a concept to almost anyone and would like to eventually be a professor in Engineering at University at Austin, a goal perhaps. I am extremely bright and humble which is also a strength and weakness; I often find it difficult to toot my own horn! I am honest and a good listener. I was diagnosed with ADD in my adulthood years. I am an optimist and sometimes unrealistically so. I am type B personality married to an extreme type A personality. I find it difficult to share my faith with others but I am a very good Christian example. I find it difficult to balance work and home life equitably – a goal to do better. I would like to be able to share my faith more openly – which is also a goal of mine.*

*I like the Schools Attuned philosophy because it agrees that every child can learn given the correct environment. Schools Attuned focuses on each child's accomplishments and progress and their grades reflect their individual accomplishments. The child isn't graded on traditional public school standards but on their own individual progress and effort. The awards ceremony at the end of each semester is a fabulous way to recognize each child's accomplishments – it gives Gary public recognition for his efforts/accomplishments. I like how Schools Attuned focuses on the whole child, character and moral development as well as formal education.*

*Schools Attuned philosophy makes Mountain School a very happy place for children to be educated despite their extreme difficulties in learning. Kids like to go there even though certain aspects of learning are very difficult for them. Gary is happy there and was completely miserable in the public school system.*

*The Schools Attuned philosophy at Mountain School makes accommodations for Gary's sometimes erratic behavior at school. They really want to help him be his best and guide him toward appropriate social behavior, to empower Gary to be responsible for his own behavior and changes that need to be made rather than just labeling him as a bad kid who can't obey the rules and just gets punished. The Schools Attuned philosophy makes teachers at Mountain School genuinely concerned for each child's educational and social development. They are in touch with each child's individual needs.*

#### Interview Participant #6 - Misty

The setting for the interview was Misty's home. She lives in a beautiful home that has a sense of comfort and family when you walk through the door. As you look out the back door and windows you overlook a pool with water flowing over the rocks, a type of small babbling brook. She also had three friendly well kept dogs that were eager to play when they walked into the house. Misty greeted me with a smile and was so interesting to visit with. All through the main part of the house were photos of her two children. It is obvious that Misty is extremely proud of her children. I met Misty at a School's Attuned training in December of 2007. Since I am not currently teaching and she was at the time, she shared some of her own students' work with me. As part of the Schools Attuned practicum we had to examine a student's work sample. We then collected data from this work sample to help identify his/her strengths and weaknesses in writing. I could tell as I

worked with her that she was a caring teacher who took the education of her students very serious.

Misty has a college degree in secondary education with English and French. She was a public school teacher and also a teacher at the Mountain School. As mentioned above Misty has been trained in the Schools Attuned program. When visiting with her during the interview about her teaching career she discussed the following that is such an important subject in education:

I was just thinking you had asked me about what to do at schools for teachers in public schools and I am just thinking back to when I taught in a public school. There have been times when I felt guilty about perhaps being a teacher who had a child with ADD and not knowing what to do with them and therefore overlooking them; and looking at them more as a behavior issue. I feel like I have always tried to work with my students in behavior and not write them off as a bad kid. I don't have any special education training. Any training I had was at the Mountain School through Schools Attuned and other things I have gone to. I did go to an Asperger's seminar. So when I taught in public schools I didn't have training. I think I had some training even if it wasn't enough for me to know exactly what to do with this child. I think it would had been enough for me to understand that this child is struggling and needs my help; somehow or some way, just something. I did have classes with 30 and 32 students but when I look back it touches me and I think I have done it. I have been the teacher who didn't know.

Misty has taught in the public school setting as a middle school and high school teacher. Misty also taught at Mountain School but currently is taking a break from teaching. She has two daughters. The eldest daughter is also a teacher. She teaches a reading program in the public schools to help At Risk children who may have not passed the TAKS test. The younger daughter, Cathy is a student at Mountain School.

Cathy started her schooling in a public elementary school in North Texas. She made the transfer to Mountain School at the beginning of her seventh grade year. Misty explains the reason for transferring to Mountain in the following statement:

We changed for two reasons; I don't know maybe even more than two reasons. She was failing the TAKS test by one or two points in math. At the end of the sixth grade year because she was failing the test she was going to be put in a lower class in public junior high and would not be allowed to participate in extra curricular activities. She would not be allowed to play volleyball which is the real key to Cathy. We felt like for one that would not be a good situation. She also had developed such a low self-esteem that she could not do this, that during the course of her sixth grade year she became anorexic.

In addition to the anorexia and the situation with failing the TAKS test, Misty felt as if she was not getting the help needed from the public school where Cathy was attending. When asked about this situation Misty stated:

As it turns out and we knew this at the time she is diagnosed with ADHD with hyper activity. She was being treated at the time but still they didn't want to do anything different. Because of her hyper activity and she also had a sense that she was already fulfilling the prophesy of being the low kid and the trouble maker.



Then they really didn't want to work with her because she would be talkative or she would be silly. So those were the tools she started to use to get attention.

As mentioned earlier that Misty was also a teacher where her daughter attended; she has a different perspective about Mountain School and Schools Attuned than any of the other interview participants. She was able to see everyday how the Schools Attuned philosophy permeates throughout the entire school. Her thoughts about Mountain and Schools Attuned are summed up in the following statement:

It is like a 9-1-1 school. It is an academic and self esteem 9-1-1 school. They (the students) are not troublemakers; they are not coming in as the kids who have given bomb threats or something like that at a school. It is not that. They are just the kids who are smart kids and who are going to contribute. But the public school and what they were able to offer was just not reaching them. Then, sadly, I think every child who comes in has a self esteem issue. It has manifested itself through depression or through maybe acting out. Sometimes it is handled real quick as soon as they get there. Sometimes it takes time. I also have taught seniors and hearing their stories, I taught senior psychology and hearing their stories as they are about to leave. Hearing them share what it was like when they first came and now how they feel going out into the world is really neat.

Interview Participant #7 - Claudia

I interviewed Claudia in the concession stand at Mountain School gym. Claudia was helping set up for a garage sale in the gymnasium. The garage sale was a fundraiser for the Mountain School booster club. Claudia is very involved at Mountain School. Many of the students were helping to organize the sale. What a great atmosphere!

Outside in the parking lot at Mountain one of the coaches was cooking hamburgers for the faculty. Mountain School seems to be busy with activities and learning. The biography written by Claudia follows.

*My occupation is a treasury professional; I hold a B.B.A in logistics and a M.B.A in finance. Most of my educational experience is derived from my husband's family. My father-in-law is a teacher/superintendent, my mother-in-law is a teacher, my sister-in-law is a teacher, and my brother-in-law holds a Ph.D. and is a professor at the university level in math/math education. I have also received extensive information from a professor from Tarleton State University.*

*My husband is self-employed. He owns his own turf grass company. He has experience in both agriculture and business. His educational backgrounds include a B.B.A. in accounting and a M.B.A in finance.*

*I don't have any hobbies, just trying to be attuned to my kids and their needs. I volunteer at church in the youth group, at Mountain School, and in my twins' school district. I was raised Catholic but am currently attending the Methodist church.*

*Before we had an understanding of our daughter's "learning difference" (we used to refer to as a "learning disability" which I no longer use AND on occasion, will correct others), we could see our daughter becoming frustrated with the learning process and her learning environment. We were also developing feelings of frustration not knowing how to help her and watching her struggle her whole life because we had not "found" the answer to help her overcome her learning difference. The whole idea behind Schools Attuned helped us uncover and understand our daughter's "learning style" and the best way to help her overcome the obstacles in her learning world. I now no longer*

*use the term “learning difference” as it implies my daughter is “different,” but rather her “learning style” because every student has a unique learning style and learns differently. The Mountain School culture reflects a Schools Attuned approach and has helped us become educated as to the best way to not only assist our daughter to be successful, but also our sons who currently attend a public school.*

*We have mimicked the same principles and techniques used at Mountain School to assist our boys in their academic studies. One simple example would be the use of a day timer to teach organization habits and responsibility for one’s assignments and tests. Though our daughter never lost the “joy of learning,” we feel she loves school even more due to her attending Mountain School for the last three years.*

*The Mountain School staff understands our daughter’s learning needs and supports the type of culture and environment which is optimum for our daughter’s learning. Also, we are committed to our daughter attending Mountain School for the next four years before graduation. My wish would be one day the Schools Attuned principles, practices, and culture would be adopted in the public school systems so all children would have the “advantage” of a Schools Attuned environment.*

#### Interview Participant #8 - Kasi

I met Kasi at the library at Mountain School. We had a nice conversation and I learned a lot about all of her children. She works for a bank in the North Texas area. She works from a computer for her job which has been an important tool to keep up with her son’s education. She mentions how email has truly helped open the doors of communication between her and her son’s teachers. Kasi is a devoted mother of three. The biography written by Kasi follows.

*I am a 37 year old single mother of three boys. For the past six years I have had a career in auto financing. My hobbies include playing basketball and watching my boys play sports. I am active in my church community. I graduated from E.H.S., attended college in Texas and transferred to a school in Oklahoma.*

*I really like the Schools Attuned program. I was introduced to the program about five years ago with Mountain School. One of my sons attends Mountain School. When I first learned about Schools Attuned I was not familiar with the process and the requirements of parents and students. After the first year I learned that the program was helpful in bridging the gap between parents and teachers. This bridge helps the parent to be involved in the daily activities and learning of the students. The continuous updating and goal setting has allowed me to realize the importance of being involved in the education process of the students.*

*Schools Attuned has also helped me deal with my other children that are in a public school setting. I am able to set goals with their teachers and follow up and monitor their progress from one six week period to the next. I feel that I am on the same page as the teachers as to the education of my children.*

#### Interview Participant #9 - John

John and I met at Mountain School. John arranged to meet with me an hour or so before picking up his son Jared from Mountain. We met in the conference room in the main office. The school was buzzing with activity. As I approached the school, a class was doing an activity outside and looked to be enjoying themselves. It is great to see a school so full of energy. The walls were decorated with students' work samples and everyone I spoke to seemed welcoming and happy to have me at the school. John is a very

involved parent. He obviously wants what is best for his son. John works in retail and in the past opened up a major store in the North Texas area. The biography written by John follows.

*I was born in 1961 in Galesburg, Illinois. I am one of four boys. My father's profession is a salesman and business owner and my mother is an educator with a master's degree in Business Administration. I graduated high school from Des Moines Technical (Distributive Education) in 1979. I graduated in the top 3% ranking at number eight out of 362 students. I am a three year letterman in swimming and tennis. In 1979 I won the MVP award in swimming. I finished my senior year placing fifth at the state meet in one meter diving. I was awarded All American status for high school athletes. I attended the University of Northern Iowa and graduated with a B.S. in Marketing. I was a four year letterman in swimming and diving and an All American in 1980 with a 12<sup>th</sup> place finish at the National Meet.*

*I married in July of 1983. My wife's profession is a software configuration manager with Lockheed Martin (Defense). My wife and I are members of the First Christian Church, Disciples of Christ. We both have helped teach Sunday school and have played an active role in our church life.*

*We have two children, one daughter and one son. My early hobbies were Boy Scouts, butterfly collecting, coin collecting, and any sporting event that led to being outdoors, riding bicycles, and skateboarding. My hobbies with my children are coin collecting, scouting (boy and girl), helped coach soccer and softball, and target shooting (pistol).*

*My profession is retail management. I began in 1983 at Richman Gordman where I was a trainee, then became a department manager at Macy's, moved from a department manager to a operations manager at Sanger Harris/Foleys, then I was an assistant manager and general manager at Saks Fifth Avenue Outlet, and currently I am a assistant store manager for Kohl's Department Stores.*

*I am a well respected member of Management within Kohl's. I have trained five new assistant store managers; promoted four area supervisors to assistant managers, promoted six associated to department supervisors, and have been named Assistant Manager of the busy fourth quarter season two year running. I have accomplished the above in the last three years by communicating common goals, focusing on the goals, and following through to completion on the tasks and issues along the way, anticipation issues and removing roadblocks to my success.*

*Schools attuned means that my son will receive an education that will help him grow, cope with, and deal with all of the outside challenges of an individual who learns and retains information just a little differently than other students. The teachers understand that each child entrusted to them is different than the student next to them. They get to know the student as a person, and want to help them grow and learn. My son is working very hard to try to respect others' feelings even though he is just stating facts and common occurrences.*

*The teachers and administration help set goals that will help the child grow as an individual and will hopefully enable my child to be able to live independently in the near future without much supervision. It is their goal as well as the parents' to empower the*

*child to make their own decisions and learn to live with the consequences of the decisions they made. They are helping the child to see past today and into the future.*

#### Interview Participant #10 - Jill

Our interview took place in the Mountain School cafeteria. We set up next to the stage to have our conversation. I met Jill at Mountain School because she was organizing the garage sale with Claudia. The garage sale is intended to help raise money for the Booster Club to buy the students new athletic equipment. Jill was so nice to let me intrude while she was busily setting up for the sale. Some of the Mountain students were also helping to organize and set up for the sale. It was obvious that day how involved Jill is in her son's life. One of her sons, Charlie, attends Mountain. The interview that I conducted validated her involvement with both of her sons' lives.

It was great to have the Mountain School as the setting for the interview. That specific day was bubbling with activity. Students were practicing on the stage, and playing basketball in the gym, and teachers and parents were coming in and out of the cafeteria to drop off items for the sale and enjoying the activity. It is obvious to a visitor, like me, when a school is thriving because of the excitement and morale that people exude.

Like I stated above, Jill has two sons and one of them attends Mountain. Jill stated in her interview that Charlie was diagnosed with short term memory loss and processing issues in the third grade. They enrolled Charlie in Mountain School in sixth grade. Up until sixth grade he attended his local public school. Jill's other son, Rubin, is in fifth grade and suffers with a rare spinal disorder called syringomyelia. He does not attend Mountain with his older brother. He is enrolled in their public school. Jill states the

following regarding the difficulties she has encountered with her other son and his health problems,

Once he got diagnosed we ended up having to home bound him for a little while. Last year we started back up his fourth grade year, we tried going to school walking but then it was too much on him so he had to go into a wheel chair. Some of the problems that Rubin has are bladder embalm incontinence and he has extreme fatigue. He gets overheated and he has heat intolerance due to medication that he is on, and just his pain level being so high. So we had to go back into the wheelchair his fourth grade year. We had a lot of problems with that. The teacher did not want to put a handicap accessible desk in her room because it threw her rows off. So my child was sitting out in the hall way looking into the classroom trying to learn. I mean I just don't understand that. This was an older experienced teacher.

Jill is a devoted mother to her two sons. She would truly love to have both of her sons at Mountain School. She commented that her older son is gaining such confidence in himself that he feels ready to go back into the public school setting. Jill states the following in regards to her son feeling confident:

Like I said I have asked Charlie things are going really good maybe we should just stay at Mountain. Because we were planning on his eighth grade year being his last year and going on to high school in public. I am ok where he is at. He is doing good and making good grades, I am real comfortable with everything. He said, no I think I will be good. That was almost more amazing than him wanting



to stay because to me, I thought wow that means he has got confidence now. He knows he can do this. He knows that he can handle that.

I then asked Jill that maybe after Charlie goes back into the public setting she could enroll Ruben in Mountain and she made the following statement,

I would really love to if we could just because with Ruben, with what he has it deteriorates the spinal cord so we don't really know what or where he is going to be at anytime. Next month he could be back in the wheel chair. We are working on quality of life with him now so we never know. This would be an ideal place for Ruben.

Jill truly wants what is best for her children. She makes this clear in the following statement, "It is my responsibility for my children to have the tools to be all that they can be. The two jobs that God gave me in life are to be a wife and a mother and that comes before anything to me. Whatever sacrifice I have to do I am going to do, because it is my job."

Jill is also involved in the PTA and a Booster Club officer at Mountain School. She is over all admissions and concessions for the Booster Club, "I set up all the volunteers for all of our games to make sure everything stays stocked. Then I am the middle school coordinator in the PTO." Not only does Jill stay involved in her two sons' educational lives but she also has her own profession.

Very involved, I think you have to be. Again that is another sacrifice. I own my own business as a massage therapist. I also work for another company doing marketing. I write all their proposals and things like that. A lot of my work is not done during the day. I mean my phone calls are, I am always on call but again it is

a sacrifice for me working on the computer at 2:00 a.m. to be able to be here for my children to know what they are doing. Both of them I am equally involved in both schools. You have to be, you have to know what is going on with your child you have to know what environment they are in, you have to step back and see them interact with their friends to know if there is a problem. I think that all is relative to what is going on. That is sometimes how you can see what is really going on with them is how they correspond and respond to different people in different situations.

Jill's husband is a contractor. He does remodeling work and currently, or at the time of the interview, he was doing cabinets and countertops for new construction. Both Jill and her husband are committed to their children's education.

Jill made the following comment in regards to her thoughts about Schools Attuned and its impact on her son, Charlie,

Again always a good student but such a difference. We were thinking; wow we should have just given him those tools earlier that way he could have dealt with things. This is the kid that since he was in second grade he would say I am going to MIT. He would sit there and say, you know I think (when we have a bad tornado here) someone should design a building that could go underground and use blah blah leverage. I would say you need to talk to dad about that because that is above mama's head. He just has that ability. It has just been amazing that it might actually be a reality for him.

## Interview Participants

Participant #1 – Shannon

Sons that attend Mountain – P.J. and Jason

Participant # 2 – Kim

Daughter that attends Mountain – Teri

Participant #3 – Harriett

Son that attends Mountain – Addison

Participant #4 – Robin

Sons that attend Mountain - Tom and Maurice

Participant # 5 – Tony

Son that attends Mountain – Gary; Gary’s mom - Abbie

Participant #6 – Misty

Daughter that attends Mountain – Cathy

Participant #7 – Claudia

Daughter that attends Mountain – Rachael

Participant #8 – Kasi

Son that attends Mountain – Clinton

Participant #9 – John

Son that attends Mountain – Jared

Participant # 10 - Jill

Son that attends Mountain – Charlie

## MAJOR EMERGENT THEMES

The interviews and written protocols allowed me to find common themes among the ten interview participants. The themes followed a progression that displayed the effects of Mountain School and Schools Attuned. Before Schools Attuned coupled with Mountain School, parents seemed to be struggling and lost, and they felt a sense of hopelessness. They desperately needed guidance and tools to assist them as they guided their child. As the parents and students found Mountain School, learned about the Schools Attuned program, and how it would serve their child with a learning difference, their lives became transformed. Not only were the parents and students transformed personally but also their home life was altered. The interview participants also noted how their financial lives were transformed because of the extra expense of Mountain School. Finally the participants discussed how Schools Attuned was the driving force behind Mountain School, and how this program has been a bastion of light while molding a school culture of acceptance, partnership, and hope.

### Parents' Struggles Before Schools Attuned

When one has a child with a disability or learning difference there are many emotions and hardships that flood the human soul. The participants that I interviewed shared with me many types of emotions such as frustration, guilt, exhaustion, exclusion, and the social stigmas they encountered when dealing with their child who has a learning difference.

All of the participants that I interviewed at one time had their child in the public school system. Most of the families never intended to put their child in a private school but because they feared their child would fall through the educational cracks, they found

a better place for their child to be served. One of the participants (Shannon) submitted the following writing as a description of the emotional rollercoaster parents go through when they have a child with a disability.

I am often asked to describe the experience of raising a child with disabilities-to try to help people who have not shared that unique experience to understand it to imagine how it would feel. It's like this...When you're going to have a baby; it's like planning a fabulous vacation trip to Italy. You buy a bunch of guide books and make your wonderful plans. The Coliseum, the Michelangelo David, the gondolas in Venice. You may learn some handy phrases in Italian. It's all very exciting. After months of eager anticipation the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go. Several hours later the plane lands, the stewardess comes in and says, "Welcome to Holland." "Holland?!?" you say, what do you mean Holland? I signed up for Italy. I am supposed to be in Italy. All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy. But there has been a change in the flight plan. They've landed in Holland and there you must stay. The important thing is that they haven't taken you to some horrible, disgusting, filthy place, full of pestilence and disease. It's just a different place. So you must go out and buy new guidebooks. And you must learn a whole new language. And you will meet a whole new group of people you would have never met. It's just a different place. It is slower paced than Italy, less flashy than Italy. But after you've been there for a while you catch your breath, you look around, and you begin to notice that Holland has windmills, Holland has tulips, Holland even has Rembrandts. But everyone you know is busy coming back from Italy, and they're all bragging about what a wonderful time

they had there. And for the rest of your life you will say, “Yes that’s where I was supposed to go. That’s what I had planned.” And the pain of that will never ever go away because the loss of that dream is a very significant loss. But if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn’t get to Italy you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things about Holland.

While Shannon was reading this writing to me I could feel in her voice the truth to this writing. I could imagine all of the participants and their stories somewhere throughout this writing. This writing speaks the truth when stating “But if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn’t get to Italy you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things about Holland.”

Shannon discussed the emotion of guilt when dealing with a child who has a disability and also having other children at home. She also felt guilt when trying to attend to her other children and their educational needs; she felt as though she spent so much of her time focused on P.J. and his medical problems that she didn’t have anything left over for her other children.

Not only did Shannon feel guilt but she also felt the emotions of disappointment and hopelessness. “I will never forget what a teacher in another school in an IEP (individualized educational program) meeting said to me. Now he is going to reach a point and he is going to plateau.” This statement not only pierced Shannon’s heart but stuck with her until the teachers at Mountain convinced her otherwise. She even told one of the teachers at Mountain herself that P.J would plateau. I said he is going to plateau and you can tell me. These teachers want, they

believe they can teach any child. They believe it. But I had the plateau comment

back in my brain. I can still remember that teacher (in the public school) and she did that lovingly. She was trying to prepare me but she was wrong bless her heart.

So many parents of children with learning differences are not given hope. They hit road block after road block and hear such comments as the teacher Shannon described. Bauer and Shea (2003) devote a chapter of their book to the impact of family dynamics when having a child with a disability; the authors tell us that the “diagnosis of a child with a disability is a significant life stressor that will affect the future development of the family at all levels” (p. 55).

Kim can remember her husband dealing with the emotion of disappointment as he began to realize that their daughter did have a learning difference:

That is when I told my husband we need to put her at Mountain. Of course another issue sometime you face as a parent of one of these children. I have seen it frequently happen and it is usually the man going there is nothing wrong. There is nothing wrong. She just needs a little extra work, she just needs to focus. No there is something wrong. I don't know if it is men's, I think women do tend to have more of an innate sense of there is something wrong here and men don't.

Parents also go through emotions of feeling blind as to how to help their child's educational needs. Levine (2002) tells the reader that “Equipped with some knowledge and open-mindedness, parents can and should become well-informed mind watchers”(p. 296). The participants did want to be mind-watchers but felt as though they were aimlessly wandering through educational mud and were slowly sinking. Many of the participants felt as they were doing it all. They felt as though they weren't equipped

with the correct information for their children. Kim states the following about her daughter:

When she first started school we just thought well she needs some extra work. Now looking back I just think, and it was ignorance, I just think we put so much of a load on that baby. We would do extra workbooks. I would go to the teacher store and get practice workbooks in math or letters, simple phrases, diphthongs, vowel pairs, whatever. Wherever we went in the car the restaurants, instead of coloring my kid would be sitting there working on her handwriting skills. She didn't realize that is was work. It became such a part of her life.

Kim did discuss that Teri's teachers up until fourth grade took her advice and tried to incorporate her advice into the classroom. It was in the fourth grade that Kim decided to make the transition to Mountain School, "I met with the fourth grade team probably every three weeks. They would nod and they would say ok we understand, we understand and never change their teaching methods." Because of examples like this Kim stated in her interview, "That is when I knew we needed to put her at Mountain because I felt I was bringing education to the teachers."

Claudia also felt as though she and her family was having to instruct Rachael's teachers and try to figure out for themselves her specific needs:

But in second grade my daughter, because my mother and father-in-law and husband's side of the family are all in education. She started noticing something that was a little bit different about Rachael and her education. She had to re-teach all the concepts everything she learned in the classroom she had to re-teach at night. So my daughter was completely exhausted. So the school system said that



she was probably ADD or ADHD. My mother-in-law with her background said, you know there is really nothing ADD about this child, she might have a little bit of it but something else is not right. So we actually had her privately tested. We found out that she has an auditory processing deficiency. So she doesn't process verbal instruction the way kids normally do. So we endured that through the fifth grade. My mother-in-law actually took the teacher's curriculum and adapted it to my daughter.

Kasi, another parent, also talks about hitting road blocks while trying to figure out how to help her son. Kasi, like all of the other parents was trying to find her son's niche and build upon his strengths academically. Doing homework at night for Kasi and her son was just plain exhausting and emotionally draining.

It wasn't like we had to re-teach it was just like reiterating everything. We would say ok read back over this so it was like doing it all over again what he had already done in class and we did. He was able to pick it up and it was fine but it would take longer. I mean we were doing homework for two to three hours compared fifteen to thirty minute type things. I think one night we really did almost three hours before he could get the grasp.

Having to take upon yourself the educational needs of your children can be an emotional rollercoaster. Muscott (2002) talks about the importance of having a partnership between families and the school community especially families who have children with learning differences.

John and his wife remember trying to build a partnership with their son's elementary school staff. They don't blame the staff or the teachers with their feelings of

frustration. They just felt the size of the school may have stimulated problems with their son who had been diagnosed with Aspergers.

We met with the vice-principal which I guess there was one for seventh and one for eighth grade. They said they would get to the bottom of it or whatever. You really can't get your arms around all the seventh grade kids, there were something like 400 kids, 30 or 40 people in the class; you just can't control it that way.

Going back to my schooling there is no way you can control the teasing and the bullying in the hallways, at recess, and at lunch. It was going to be a no win.

John also talked about dealing with the school and the emotion of frustration and helplessness, just wanting someone to understand his child.

At one particular ARD (admissions, review, and dismissal) meeting they were saying well he needs to go into special education. No, he doesn't need special education he just needs some accommodations. He could go into the counselor's office anytime he wanted to chat. But that was about it through elementary; nothing really in the seventh grade. They did have one class in the seventh grade that was more of the daily functions and routines. I don't know what they called it? We used to call it home-economics when I was in school. But that type of issues how to do some of the cooking. That was just a generic class. That wasn't set up for him or anything. But someone wanted to try and move him into special education. When they tested him for first grade he had like 120 I.Q. and I said, well he is not going into special education. He just needs someone to understand what he is going through.

John could not see it getting any better in the public school that his son was attending. He states the following about this specific situation:

That is the reason we pulled him out because we didn't see it getting any better. Then if he went through seventh and eighth grade and then to the high school where there were 4,000 kids we would have pulled our hair out. He would have completely shut down.

Like John, Cathy also felt helpless as she watched her daughter struggle with the pressures of education. Because Cathy failed the TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) test in the public school Cathy's interests, volleyball and playing the cello were taken away from her. The school felt as though by taking these away Cathy could devote more time to the TAKS test and eventually pass it. However, Cathy spiraled down hill. Cathy's mom states the following concerning her daughter:

She would not be allowed to play volleyball which is the real key to Cathy. We felt like for one that would not be a good situation. She also had developed such a low self-esteem that she could not do this that during the course of her sixth grade year she became anorexic. Losing over 25 pounds on her little five foot one frame and that became very serious. It was terrible! Beginning the summer before sixth grade she became extremely depressed. The psychiatrist she had been seeing for ADHD then started treating her for depression. During the course of that year she just stopped eating. I can not tell you how heartbreaking that was to have an 11/12 year old child not eat. The whole family was depressed. We were very desperate. We would just pray for some direction and we looked into other private schools but we really didn't see a difference between them overall.

Misty, Cathy's mom, kept hitting roadblock after roadblock when trying to get help for her daughter's situation in the public school. I am sure as all of the other parents have discussed she felt the emotion of being alone in the big world of education.

However, we felt like she was not getting any extra help at the school. In classroom activity she was taking the same test as the other kids were taking. You know really in her class work she did fine. She made like B's and C's. She was not an A student. Her sixth grade year I wanted to talk with her principal; at first her principal would not speak to me. I wanted the principal's help to find out what we could do to help Cathy. I tried to explain to them that sports were so important to Cathy and at the time Cathy was also playing the cello. She would not be allowed to play volleyball or play the cello. I was trying to get someone to work with me and they said no, until she passes the TAKS test she can't do either one. What we experienced was that they just took her out of things and the things they took her out of were the things that gave her the most pride and built her self-esteem.

Misty was seeking a partnership with her daughter's school. Because there wasn't any type of bond between the school and parent many negative emotions were brought to the surface. Muscott (2002) states, that "exceptional partnerships should provide opportunities for parents to become involved in meaningful aspects of their child's education and the overall functioning of the school" (p. 69). Without this partnership the student and parent may become frustrated.

The emotion of frustration could also be derived from Tony's experience when trying to get help for his son in his public elementary school. Tony does not blame the

teachers in Gary's former elementary school but did suggest that a lack of help from them was attributing to Gary's problems with reading. Gary states, "We felt by the end of second grade we knew as much or more about how kids learn to read than any of his elementary school teachers."

Harriett also had similar feelings, that of frustration. During the time that her son, Addison, was in the public school she remembers the trials she went through when dealing with the school officials in regards to her son and his academic well-fare.

In fact I got really frustrated because we would have these ARD meetings (admissions, review, dismissal) at the end of the school year and I would say, shouldn't teachers from the next grade level be in here? And they would say, no, no, no. To me if the people who are supposed to be carrying out what you have done aren't even in the room when you are discussing it. I really felt that the administration was just doing what they had to do, the minimum. And they weren't even doing that well. I think Addison was a problem to them because he wasn't going to help them on their TAKS scores. He was going to hurt them. It might have been better if we had been in a different school that had more kids that were struggling and different administrators. Another thing I would see with Addison was because he was struggling he was ending up in those classes that had the kids that were struggling because they had the behavior problems. They often got more of the attention; Addison was not a behavior problem but needed the extra attention academically.

Harriett would also feel lost and frustrated at home when trying to help Addison with his homework.

Often it would be things sometimes things that seemed far above. There didn't always seem to be a logical progression. They would throw things at him that seemed to be much above than where he should be. I finally figured out what they were doing. His homework didn't really have anything to do with what he was learning in class. It was TAKS preparation. So we would hit things that they had not covered. Particularly in math they did that. So he developed math phobia. I didn't understand that at first. I thought that you all must be covering that in class and finally I figured out no, they were doing other things. That was what bothered me. I didn't always know what they were doing in class to support him at home. Because he needed that extra help at home and their solution was to either let him struggle until he was totally behind or they wanted to put him in what they called resource where he was working with an aid that I had concerns about her capabilities. And I said, I think I could do better, that didn't set so well with the administrators.

Jill also became frustrated with her son, Charlie's educational path.

I felt that he got overlooked (at school). He was an A/B student, very well-behaved. He didn't do a lot of participation because of his shyness, didn't really raise his hand. The teacher would end up calling on him because she knew he would know the answer. But other than that he didn't volunteer himself. At home we would have a couple of hours of homework and I would have to re-explain things to him and of course I am not explaining them the way the teachers are explaining them. So that is confusing him because the way I was taught was not the way he was taught. So I am trying to figure out ok how were you taught so I

can reach you? We were going in circles. It was very confusing to him and again he would just get really frustrated.

Jill did attempt to build educational bridges with Charlie's teachers, to try and help them recognize his differences. During the interview Jill was asked the question "When he (Charlie) was in the public school was the problems or differences in the way he learned recognized?" She responded in the statement,

No, not until after we brought it up. When we had him tested we brought it to their attention and they said, oh yeah we can see that. I asked them I think he is bored can we present things a little differently? We were pretty much told oh we have 20 other kids in the classroom.

Not only did Jill become frustrated but Charlie was fighting a losing battle with his learning differences. According to Jill Charlie needed help,

He knows what he needs to do. So what was so frustrating to him is that he knew what he needed to do and it was frustrating, why can't I understand this? Why am I not reading this and why can't I tell you what you tell me about it? He was getting angry and frustrated because he didn't know how to fix it. He just had all this stuff going on in his head trying to fix it and he couldn't fix it because he didn't have those tools to fix it.

Jill also represents an emotion of fear, afraid of losing her son if he didn't get the help needed.

Many of the participants also expressed the idea that social issues have also been an adjustment for their child and also themselves as the parent. For children with learning differences social isolation often goes hand in hand. Some of the participants shed a few

tears during the topic of social adjustment. Most parents want their child to be accepted by their peers. When this doesn't occur the heart of the parent hurts. Lavoie (2005) reminds the reader that "children go to school for a living," and if they are miserable at school because of social issues they will be miserable at home and their academics will suffer (p. xxviii).

Not only are social stigmas associated with only children who have learning differences but also their parents. Kim recalls dealing with social issues on both sides, with her daughter and for herself.

There is such a stigma attached to how you children do in school. They are three years a part (her son and daughter), although because Teri repeated school they are four years a part scholastically. When I went through school as David's (Kim's son) mommy I was in the top mommy tree house. I was PTA board, room mother, very involved and everybody knew me and said hi. Four years later as I am doing it with Teri the uber mommies don't talk to me, they say hi and that is it. They don't stop and talk, they don't invite me into their little circles. I am not invited to be the room mom. I could tell a difference as to when I was David's mommy and when I was Teri's mommy. With David every birthday party, are you coming to Cotillion, are you coming to this, are you coming to that? Nobody ever called for Teri. I remember one birthday party I cried trying to do the invitations because it was hard to come up with ten girls to invite to her birthday party. She wanted to have a birthday party and we really only had about three friends, one at church, one at school, and one girl in girl scouts. Many, many tears over that.



Kim also discussed how hard it was for her to have conversations with other parents about their children. Often parents don't think about what they are saying and how it can hurt when one has a child with a learning difference. Most parents aren't trying to hurt feelings on purpose, but when they have never walked in the shoes of a parent who has a child with a learning difference they can't understand the heartache. Kim speaks directly to this subject.

I have go a couple of friends you know when they start talking about how their children have got to take the SAT and we are applying here and we are applying there and my child is just so gifted. We got this award and that award. I hated awards day. I came to loather awards day, but Teri wanted me there because she would get her perfect attendance award. Then I had to sit there and watch the same 10% get high math, high English, high this, best grade in this, best grade in that, art award blah, blah,blah.....clap, clap, clap. Can I go home now? But always went for Teri and I would watch her get her perfect attendance certificate, she was so proud of that. Then I would have to sit there and clap for the same 10% whose mothers weren't speaking to me. Except the ones who had older brothers and sisters the same grade as David who knew I had a smart child too, not just a stupid child. The social dynamics were really interesting.

As Kim discussed, other people just didn't quite understand the life of a parent who has a child with learning differences. Jill also discussed how others didn't understand why she was worried about her son who was falling behind in reading and the difficult decisions that parents have to make for their child.

I really didn't know that Charlie really had a problem. I mean he made A/B's everyone was like what is wrong with that? My dad was like the boy is smart what is wrong with that? Why do you have to go and put him into a school blah, blah.....? They didn't understand that. I'm like that is true but there is just something missing. He is not being all that he can be.

As children age over time they begin to take notice when some of their peers are lagging behind academically. This also creates a social stigma and can result in children becoming excluded because of their academic standing. When discussing with Tony what might have happened to Gary if he did not received help for his learning difference he talked about this idea.

I don't know I hate to picture it because it was getting difficult even last year. He would ride to school with two other boys. One of them was a great kid, really nice but he was reading the Harry Potter series and was in the third grade. You could tell he would start to see a difference in Gary. He would use that as school kids would and say hey I am better than you. So we knew that wasn't helping Gary.

John recalls the social frustrations he had with his son before attending Mountain School. Often his son just didn't get the social cues of society. The misunderstanding that went with not knowing the social cues led to worry for the parent.

Well we had private school for pre-school and kindergarten and then moved into Dallas public schools for first through sixth grade. Then even through seventh and into the middle school we had problems with the associations and socialization skills; getting teased and picked on and what not. We decided to withdraw him at that point, of course he was diagnosed several years ago and we had always

worked with the teachers real well. Middle of seventh grade we ended up having to withdraw him. He was just getting picked on mercilessly.....

John went on to explain why he was being picked on:

His was socializations skills. He has got Aspergers. He is a bright kid as far as that goes but doesn't pick up on the social cues. When people are teasing he doesn't really know it as such or why they are laughing at him. He will laugh at a joke and then ask what does it mean? It was tough; especially on him. He would always come home and say well this happened or whatever. Then we would have to go up to the school and find out what is really going on. I bet we were at least in seventh grade, junior high; we were probably up to the school at least once a month.

These social problems caused Jared to hate school. When asked if Jared hated school, John responded in the following remarks,

Oh absolutely! At the end, he would try to open his locker and they (other students) would slam it shut. He would be late to class because he would have to open his locker three or four times.

Social skills not only equip a child for life outside of the classroom but also in the classroom. Children who have learning differences often find it difficult to relate on an appropriate social level inside the classroom. Misty talks about this issue and the negative consequences.

As it turns out and we knew this at the time she is diagnosed with ADHD with hyper activity. She was being treated at the time but still they didn't want to do anything different (the teachers). Then too because of the hyper activity and she

also had a sense that she was already fulfilling the prophesy of being the low kid and the trouble maker. Then they didn't really want to work with her because she would be talkative or she would be silly. So those were the tools she started to use to get attention, negative attention, but to get attention.

Misty like some of the other interview participants remembers the feeling of social isolation outside the classroom. Misty notes that she was probably more heartbroken than her daughter when incidents might occur. Misty also attributes some of the social issues to parenting and how the child is reared. All children go through some type of social isolation but for the child with a learning difference they quite often are the "easy target" for social beatings. When asked the question, "Were you treated differently as a parent maybe from other parents because of what was happening (the trails of having a daughter suffering from a learning difference)? Did you notice anything?" Misty responded:

I felt I was. It was a very unhappy time. I'm not a real clique person. I just like to visit with people and try not to get in on things. This particular school did have a clique per say of both moms and their daughters. I guess the final straw at the elementary school which also was Mountain Elementary ironically. The little group of girls, one of them was going to have a birthday. The mother had arranged for the limo to come to the school and this was in sixth grade to pick the girls up to go to the party. Well the mother came to me that day because I was up there for a concert and she said to me.....she never had spoken to me and that day she was so nice.....and she said, can Ann wait with Cathy today after school, I am going to be late picking her up? I said oh certainly and so I drive up

and here is this limo and all these girls are getting in the limo and here is Cathy with Ann. Cathy is just thrilled to death thinking that Ann might get to come home with her or something. Here comes the mother and she says, well thank you, Cathy was just a decoy, the party is for Ann but I wanted her to be surprised. Then she takes Ann and Cathy was not invited. She puts Ann in the limo and they drive off and Cathy is left standing there. It was just heartbreaking. Claudia and Shannon both talk about how they really don't have or didn't have a social life themselves due to needs of their children. Claudia states:

I have no life. I don't do stuff with friends unless it is family friends with children that we get together with. We get home and we have a routine. I spend time with each kid and have to complete left over homework, bedtime, and reading. It is an everyday thing. It is a routine. You get off of your routine and you are in big trouble.

Shannon also stated during a phone conversation that her social life also is limited because of the needs of her children. During the interview she expressed the memories of how exhausted and time consuming it was for her as she dealt with the daily pressures of having a child with a learning and physical disability.

I was by myself. I had such little sleep that is when I started sleeping in my clothes because I could already be ready, if I slept in my clothes I could be ready for school. I forgot I was doing that and I wasn't getting sleep because I either slept with P.J. or on the floor because he was to keep his hamstrings lengthened out. We kept him in a brace while he was sleeping. We did this because during his sleep his muscles were growing. So I was sleeping with him. I would either sleep

on the sofa, I was afraid he would try to find me in the night and come downstairs. So I either, I would start on the sofa and when he started calling for me I'd go in there and try get him to sleep longer. I was worn out. I would have to take P.J. downtown for therapy and then get home, cook dinner, and all that bathing to do on my own.

### Transformation as a Result of Schools Attuned

The interview participants have illustrated by their words the daily struggles they have encountered when having a child with a learning difference. These struggles, though many, have not conquered these parents. Instead of giving up, the participants began searching for answers that would benefit their child individually. The following data portrays how the lives of these parents and their children have been transformed.

#### *Parents*

When the interview participants began to discuss the life changes that have occurred because of Mountain School and Schools Attuned, a sense of hope spread across their face. It was as if a light was beaming out of their eyes. The positive facial expressions and body language illustrated that positive change was occurring.

Because of the overall atmosphere of Mountain and the teaching style of the teachers the parents have been transformed and empowered. They exuded a sense of normalcy and direction when discussing this subject. They feel as though they have an insight to their child's educational issues and how to address those issues in a positive light. They now understand what obstacles they must watch out for and now have a direction manual for their child. Harriett discusses the tools that have enabled her to be a more informed parent and an overall happier parent.

I can't say I know a lot in depth about it (Schools Attuned) but I do understand some of the principles and had some workshops, like we had one Tuesday night for the parents. This one was on homework. I have had questions that I feel like I could ask (at Mountain). I guess my feeling I am more willing to let the teachers do what they think, I don't want to come in and tell them how to do it. But I also feel like if it is not working or if I have questions than I want to be able to come in and at least talk about it and get an understanding. I think sometimes that was misinterpreted in the past (before Mountain).

Tony addresses that life after Mountain is not perfect; there are still struggles at home with homework and such but overall things are looking better. Tony and his wife seem to have a clearer picture of how to help their son and this is paying off for both parent and child.

I guess we don't talk as much with him about the mechanics of how he learns but we know that he understands that the repetitive things seem to be helping him most like doing fluency work where he goes over the same words five times in a week. He goes through a list and you can see how that has improved. Abbie will have a sheet of words and he may be familiar with some of them but not all of them. He will read through them and Abbie will time how long it takes to read through each one. Then however many he doesn't read correctly she makes note of that. Each day she shows him how he has improved because when he goes over it again by the end of the week he is usually reading it in half of the time with half of the mistakes or less. To him that is clear evidence that if I just do this over and over again it is helping me...When he first started out at Mountain School we saw

some pretty positive changes. As soon as Abbie saw how the fluency was helping him that was a big benefit to be able to learn this. It helped to build the confidence....Most of it (Mountain School) has been positive. He (Gary, Tony and Abbie's son) realized he is learning. That has built his self-confidence.

Gary's self-confidence has strengthened because he realizes that he is smart. He can do things but it may take different tools to reach him. It is obvious in the above quote that Gary's parents have taken the opportunity to help Gary. They have been given knowledge and a map to strengthen Gary's academic knowledge and his confidence. Towards the end of the conversation Tony displayed some work samples that showed off Gary's accomplishments. He ended the visit with the following statement.

Abbie spends about an hour or so depending on how cooperative he (Gary) is each day going through this (fluency practice drills). It is a lot of work but she can definitely see the pay off. This one is how many you can do in a minute (showing a work sample). He started off with about nine and now he is up to about 30 by the end of the week where he sees it and says it.

Shannon discussed how Mountain School opened the doors for empowerment and transformation through communication. Shannon now feels confident in her own knowledge of how her two boys learn best:

These teachers (at Mountain) almost bombard you with communication. With the hotline, I could put out files of things, such good material they send out a monthly letter. That is helpful. Everything from homework ideas and helping kids with homework. Helping families plan vacations. I would save all of that. I have a file of ideas that they would send to me. When you have a child with a learning



difference you have to plan a vacation differently. Just like if you were taking your mother and dad on a senior vacation. Sometimes parents gripe that they give you so much good information. I file the good stuff. People in the community know that you have children at Mountain School they recognize that Mountain School teachers are experts too. They will ask you, I have neighbors that ask me and want advice on their students that maybe don't need a Mountain School but they need some suggestions. Their children learn uniquely too. You become an expert in the community, in your neighborhood when they find out.

Claudia deliberated how Mountain has given her the tools to help her daughter.

Mountain School sponsors Parent Education programs that focus on topics like helping you child with homework. The school also emphasizes parent/teacher conferences to help both the parents and teachers focus on the same goals for the student. But the school has taught me a lot. This year I am more engaged than I have been the last two years. I have to know exactly what my daughter is doing and where they are falling short and everybody does. The school is not perfect...I don't think she would be where she is at today if we hadn't come here. I think it has given her a lot of confidence. From an academic stand point I think this has been a better choice for her because we do know what her strengths and weaknesses are and all of the teachers know that.

Like Shannon and Claudia, Kasi felt transformed and empowered by the tools that the Mountain staff have revealed to her.

I know Mrs. Simms who has right now has given me the different type of homework websites and new ones that she will find. That has been a real help to

me. Because we can easily go there and they will give us some tips that really help me. Since I have been out of school for awhile I have to brush up and read a head and then help Clinton. Now I can let him go because we have some homework websites that he can go on and look up come back and he is through with his work in 15-45 minutes. An hour tops depending on what he is working on. It is a lot easier, a lot smoother; the smooth transition started when he came here in the eighth grade. It has helped him a lot he still has struggles but I can see progression; if I can just see a little than I am good.

Jill discussed how understanding their son's way of learning has empowered her husband in his own learning: When asked the question, "Did he (Jill's husband) think this was the best place (Mountain School) for Charlie" she elaborates by stating.

Yes it is funny he said, you know I think I was Charlie when I was young, that was me. I think if I had gotten something a little different I would be some place different. He (Jill's husband) sees a lot of that in Charlie, a lot of the way he thinks. My husband is brilliant too. He has the math and science, all of that.

Shannon also briefly discussed how Schools Attuned has helped her and her husband understand each other better. It has empowered and transformed their thinking about themselves.

It has just totally changed our lives. Not only being aware of learning and how we learn. I understand Matt (Shannon's husband) and Matt understands himself better as a learner. Yes it has made us aware of our learning. It helps me to be a better wife to Matt when I understand about how he learns.

Kim talked about how her husband felt empowered because he now understood the mind of his daughter.

Getting back just to speak one last time to the Schools Attuned protocols and the big difference it has made in our lives. It gave my husband, the mechanical engineer, a diagram and it gave him something he could put his hands on that he could now understand what Teri was experiencing, why she was experiencing it, how we needed to change some things we had done and we parent much differently than we used to when they were small. That helped a whole lot in our relationship together like I said because there was so much friction before. It put both of us now side by side on the same side of our part of that magic triangle they show you at Mountain; student, parent, teacher. It really opened Tom's eyes and made him feel better as a father. It helped him a whole lot, that Schools Attuned diagram.

### *Students*

Not only did parents state how they were transformed and empowered as a byproduct of Schools Attuned but they also depicted how their children felt transformed and empowered. The students began to overcome their feeling of "I can't do this" to a victorious feeling of understanding how they learn. They began to understand what tools they needed to be productive learners. As one of the Mountain School brochures uses the imagery of a caterpillar turning into a beautiful butterfly that is how I began to picture these children during the interviews.

Kim explained an example of how the Mountain School teachers implement their Schools Attuned training in the classroom to provide a feeling of empowerment for the student.

They (teachers) just make their own professional decisions. Because they have been trained appropriately with Schools Attuned and whatever other backgrounds they have. It works. They will just do whatever it takes to make it work. One little boy, I am trying to remember what it was, writing was horrible for him. His assignment was over the medieval stuff. So his teacher said here is going to be your exam. I want you to build me a model of a castle and have all the components and be able to explain to me medieval life. He could, he built a castle and had the black smith shop and everything, here is where the guards stand etc. there people do this etc...He knew it backwards and forwards. But he didn't have to write it down.

Kim also shared the importance of the demystification (taking the mystery out of their learning) when explaining to Teri how she learns. Demystification is a step in which Schools Attuned takes to help the child and set up a learning profile for the child. The teachers have a conference with the parent and students to demystify them. When Kim was asked if the demystification part helped, she expressed the following sentiments:

Yes, we approach as like you would explain to a child with epilepsy. There are chemicals in your brain that aren't happening. Teri, your brain does not make some chemicals that it needs to work as other children's brains do. The example I used was however, if a blind person came into my home and started knocking over the furniture and breaking things because he or she couldn't see it, that is not

excusable right? Teri would say (yeah). Ok your ADD is not an excuse to do stupid things or make bad grades at school or whatever. I said a blind person has to go to special classes to learn how to maneuver in the world without sight. You have to learn to maneuver in the world with an ADD brain or a CAPD (central auditory processing disorder) brain or whatever. It doesn't make you better than or less than a blind person can't see, you don't think normally. We just have to work together to make sure that you can maneuver in the world without knocking things over and breaking them...Teri would be happy to tell you what all she has. She says, I have ADD and that makes it hard for me to focus, keep my mind on things, and makes my hyper and I talk a lot, and I get excited. Then I don't listen and I argue a lot. I have CAPD. That is Central Auditory Processing Disorder and that is like I have dyslexia of my ears, I hear ok but then words get messed up when they get into my head and I have to listen extra careful. I have dyscalculia which makes math etc...I mean she will go through the laundry list. She can pronounce the words; we have worked hard on pronouncing the words. She knows what every one of those things means.

As Jill was discussing and explaining the changes she had noticed in her son and the transformation he had experienced, she was very joyful.

Charlie has always been a good student. Always an A/B student and well behaved. Very reserved kid of shy and not really jumping in as a leader even though he had the abilities to be a leader. With coming to Mountain School it was almost instantly just the difference he had in just everything. We really started seeing things. He started having more confidence, he was talking to people. He

was taking phone calls and he was calling people. His confidence level picked up. His grades, he had always been a very good student. A/B's, but here straight A's. I mean I am talking nothing lower than a 95%. Jest excelling in everything! Charlie's main problem was with comprehension and things of that matter. He would read something and then would try to tell you what the story was about and it wouldn't quite be the same. So that was normally his lower grade. That has changed, he is doing well. This quarter he got the highest GPA in reading. That is just amazing. That was the problem he was having. You know we got them (awards) in math and science. In those subjects we have always had high GPA's while at Mountain but this was our amazing one here (Jill is holding the reading certificate for the highest GPA). In reading, I am almost about to cry, I'm like this is what we have been waiting for, it is so amazing... He noticed the difference with being here. He said I think that is where I need to be for right now.

Jill continued and briefly went into detail as to how the teachers at Mountain have produced a transformation in Charlie and how he compensates for his reading ability.

In a typical class they say ok we are going to learn addition:  $2+2=4$ , you know write it on the board you take this number and add it to this number that is it.....here (Mountain School) I feel like they explain why you are adding these two numbers. I just think they explain things in more detail and they tell you why.

Like Jill, Shannon was amazed at the transformation of her son Jason.

He loves to learn. He is a self learner. Now he is; he wasn't always. He has learned how to learn through Schools Attuned. That is significant. When he has been taught to learn and he knows his learning style. So listen to him and let him

teach you how to teach himself. ....Now he is comfortable because he understands how he learns. He recognizes now that I am not slow at all. He is in the school play today and has the lead. I would have never thought that. Last year he interviewed with the Dallas sister cities program. This was huge for Jason to have the confidence with all these other children from top schools. All of these kids and he was accepted. We had the first two Mountain School students to be a part of the Dallas Sister Cities. He went to Japan. Every month he went to his meetings and reports are he was "Mr. Texas." I would have never thought Jason would be comfortable; yes he could go to any school here in Dallas. He is comfortable with this attention deficit.

John has also seen transformation in his son and he explains how and what has been done for this change.

I have talked to several of them (teachers) where they realized that some kids learn a little bit more from the board and some learn more from reading. Some learn more from the vocalization.....Academics, he has been on A/B honor roll every single semester (at Mountain School). So he is back to showing that he can actually do the work. Of course he did that well when we did the home schooling. As far as behavioral I think he is a little more respectful of what goes on in the classroom especially to the teachers. But he is to the point that he calls it as he sees it. I know a lot of kids with autism will just say things out loud. He will correct people or used to when he was 10 years old he would turn around and say well that person is really fat. I would say you don't have to say that out loud you

just need to keep that stuff to yourself. He used to be more matter of fact and now he is picking up a little better on the social cues.

Like Kim, Harriett also mentioned how the teachers empower the students, not just her son but other students, to produce successful work and be independent thinkers.

It was amazing and he got much more confident and comfortable. The way they taught the other subjects were they had smaller classes and they could work with him when he was struggling because he didn't always ask for help. They recognized that they had the time to observe that maybe he is not on task. You know not understanding. It is just so different seeing his confidence grow.....They (Mountain School teachers) also try to not only do written reports but they encourage doing visual things or artistic things. Like I know last year Addison had to do a poster for social science. They were doing Texas history. They were assigned a person and Addison was assigned Sam Houston. But the assignment was that you had to do a poster and write a little report about him. On the poster you could find pictures off of the internet or the books, three of those, and then three that you drew yourself. So they tried to pull in those other strengths that people have. That some kids can't write very well but they can draw. You know use those resources that let them be successful. So there is that mixture of the writing as well as the more artistic side that they try to draw on in their projects.....At Mountain I feel like there really is a focus on a second way.

Robin expressed the same sentiments as the others. Schools Attuned and Mountain School have given her sons a road map to understand their strengths and weaknesses.



One of the things we just had our parent/teacher conferences you go in there and sit down and those teachers have an entire chart and different teachers have given their input because you can't meet with all of them. But then they talk about the different areas of attunement. They talk about.... ok for Tom you know one of the great things about Tom is his higher cognitive ability is very developed for somebody who is his age. And a lot of kids at this school have difficulty with that. So they start the whole conference with that....Because here a weakness doesn't mean you are weak. It just means that you need to know....It is like Tom did an aptitude test a couple of weeks ago and it was cool because afterwards what the woman kept stressing was look you are a subjective personality, 25% of the population is subjective. Because of having a subjective personality you might encounter difficulties in certain situations. You don't want to be an elementary school teacher, but you would probably be a great college teacher where they are coming to you because they choose your course. You are an expert in your field. But what she kept stressing was but it doesn't mean you can't do it. It doesn't mean you can't do this if it is just not one of the areas that is going to be easy for you.

Robin also believed that Mountain has empowered Tom to want to continue his academic career and go to college.

But I think where Mountain has really helped Tom as far as going to college is I think he knows he wants to keep learning. That sounds to simplistic but I think he knows that he is a learner.

Claudia stated that her daughter has always loved school. Claudia believed that Rachael needed more guidance and tools to help her so she was not mentally and physically exhausted by the end of the day due to misunderstanding or not understanding the lessons presented at school.

Oh she loves it (at Mountain School). She never misses a day. She gets upset when she is sick. Now she had perfect attendance last year and she has had perfect attendance this year. She gets up every morning and wants to get there early. I think this is her home. She has always loved school and the love of learning. She is a project kid, she loves to do projects. Give her a project and I can guarantee it will be beautiful when she is done. But Rachael's issues were that she would be so exhausted by the end of the day.

Tony like the other parents has also seen a transformation in his son, because Gary can notice progress that has empowered him to want to read and has given him the confidence needed to read for pleasure. Gary's teachers have equipped Tony and his wife with techniques that they can use at home to keep Gary on track and to give him a jump start with his reading.

When Tony was asked if Gary could see success and progress since coming to Mountain School he responded the following statement.

When he started to see the progression through his fluency work it was a great benefit. He is not reading fluently yet but he has started to want to read. I think the first time he has ever done this was about a week ago he picked up a book, it was a comic book and he actually wanted to read it and he was reading it for pleasure. He had never done that before.

Tony talked a little bit about why the students and his son included feel empowered and can take ownership of their learning.

I think that seems to be part of their focus at school is to help the students understand how they learn and what coping mechanisms that can develop to be able to achieve what they want to be able to do. Maybe they will end up going to college and get their degree or maybe they can go into business, art, acting, or sports or whatever. They (the Mountain School) seem to be pretty knowledgeable that a lot of their kids there have ADHD or dyslexia, two very common conditions they are dealing with. They have tools and an understanding of how to help the kids overcome that.

Tony also explained Gary's reading and the improvements that have been made since attending Mountain. Because of his reading improvement Gary has been transformed and empowered to see the world through different eyes.

I know a number of times recently he has read something on a sign and said, look dad I can read that. You can tell his eyes brighten. I can no longer flip through the T.V. channels without him saying, hey there is Sponge Bob, dad stop. I used to be able to flip right through something that I knew he would want to watch before he would have time to read it. He has seen that it is a powerful tool (reading). He has gotten straight A's and this is his third time. Here is his A honor roll (holding up a certificate) which is a testament as to how well he is doing there. He seems to enjoy learning.

Kasi stated that her son needed a smaller environment and a teacher that would have the time to help him one on one. Since coming to Mountain she has noticed a transformation in Clinton from an academic standpoint.

He doesn't process information as quick, it is in his mind but he can't get it out as quick as he needs to. In the structure here it allows him to think and then to take a second and then put it out on paper, then go back and read what he put on paper. At the former private and public school he didn't have that opportunity. His work needed to be done and it needed to be done right in that instant. It just wasn't clicking for him. So he would just let it go and just do whatever it took to get by and that wasn't good enough...What they (Mountain teachers) do is they focus on his strengths to make him; they will say I already know you know what to say, but tell me so I can help you put in down on paper. That is what I have really liked because his major issues are with English and reading; his composition. His two teachers that he had even this year's teacher; they let him say what he needs to say and write out what is in his head, the way he thinks it should be. Then they come back and say now read this back over and then he will identify his mistakes. Because when he writes sometimes it is backwards where he is just writing what he says in his head; free style writing is what it is. Then they go back and say now put it in a structure format. Take these parts and that is what has helped him. He is not fully there but he is to a point where he can do a research paper and not have as much help as he would have needed two years ago. It has helped him a lot he still has struggles but I can see progression...The maturity level, his self-esteem, and the willingness that he has now to want to do his work and want to ask for

help has been a big deal. The biggest thing is that he accepts responsibility now. He is not scared to ask for help anymore.

Kasi also talked about how the teachers at Mountain have helped Clinton learn to balance his mind so that he can become an independent writer and thinker. The interventions that his teachers have taught him have empowered him to be in control of the way he sequences his writing.

In his mind he can process everything he needs and it is all right but when it comes out on paper his words are not correct. His mind thinks at 100 miles per hour but his output is at 20 miles per hour. His mind is already there. So they have taught him to treat all of the thoughts in his head like a basketball. He will juggle five things in his mind and he tries to do all five at one time. That is what gets him. So he has to take one ball and juggle it and then throw it away. Then get a second ball and then throw it away. The one teacher that he has had since he has been there figured this out this process. She is the one who started implementing the sports into this process.

Kasi often stated in her interview that Clinton is a big sports fan and plays basketball for Mountain School. This process implemented by his English teacher was targeting one of his affinities. Kasi has also noticed a change in Clinton's social responsibilities. She states that he has never had much trouble with social issues but has stepped up a bit more since his enrollment at Mountain.

He has always been a social child. That is his knack that is just him. He has probably helped others to step out of the box here or there. It has helped his social responsibilities. He has stepped up a lot of his responsibilities coming from here.

Because it is small and there are younger kids that look up to him so he has to set a better example in and out of the classroom.

Misty is just thrilled with the transformation of her daughter Cathy. Being at Mountain has transformed and empowered Cathy to become a leader and also to understand her learning difference and what she can do to compensate for it.

So many areas that had been areas of weaknesses are now areas of strength. That has just evolved over the years that she has been there (Mountain). She is able to pick out where she still needs to focus and how she can use the strengths to help her with the areas of weaknesses. It is all coming together but at Mountain they are putting this responsibility, they are helping the students, but they are also having the students be accountable for putting this information together to help themselves and to understand themselves. So here now at 16 she understands that one of her weaknesses still is active working memory, especially in math. If she has just learned a concept she often still has trouble applying it five minutes later. So she goes home she studies that more she is very strong with memory so she knows if she can memorize these things then the next day when she goes she pulls more from a memory basis and can work on it. That has evolved through four years.....Oh, it is just so different. Cathy is very confident...it has just improved; it has been a gradual thing. It has just improved little bits at a time over the course of the four years. Cathy has become a leader in school her behavior is very good. She just had her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday party and invited lots of friends from school but also lots of friends from church, friends of the family and to just stand there and

see how many friends she had that wanted to come and celebrate that time with her. And to just see her with everybody was just outstanding.

### *Home Life*

There is a quote that states, *Home is not where you live, but where they understand you*. Trying to understand the learning difference and how to best educate their child has been the quest for these participants. These parents are good people and want a home life that will represent understanding and love for each other. When the home life is disrupted it is hard to find peace in anything.

The participants noted how their individual children have been transformed to understand their own thinking and to successfully fill the gap that may be present in their own thinking. The participants now shifted the discussion and elaborate about how their home life has been transformed. Kasi noticed how her son Clinton is helping his other siblings at home because of the learning that has taken place at Mountain.

He has to help his other siblings. That is how I help him is by him helping them. Because they are fifth graders this year; so he has been here (at Mountain) three years so he has been helping them. Like when they have to have reading assignments I let him read out loud to them and he helps them with their sentence work or story problems or whatever it is they are doing. That is when he knew that he had issues because he was literally trying to read it out loud. He also takes his brothers to the library twice a month that is when they can check out their books twice a week so he takes them to the library. Him helping them has helped all the way around.

Tony recalls that his son's attitude toward school has changed. He tells about what it used to be like to get Gary to want to go to school.

I am remembering, I haven't thought about this in a long time, but how he (Gary) used to just say he hates school and this was second grade. He would say, I don't like being different and I feel stupid. A lot of evenings before he would go to bed I would have a talk with him and he would say, dad I just don't want to go to school. I would try to encourage him and tell him that you are going to get there I know you are working on learning and you are really trying hard. It was just hard to overcome that negativity in the situation.

Shannon reveals how her son Jason was much happier at home when going to Mountain School and how his anxiousness went down.

I mean you put Mountain School with these teachers who are all so well trained in neurological functions and strategies for helping children with attention. He just soared. His writing changed unbelievable changes in his writing. I would have thought he had dysgraphia but his handwriting changed. I pick him up at school and he still has a book. Not only did the anxiety go away, because when you are anxious and you can't focus and you are a smart kid and you can't focus, that's frustrating. The anxiousness went down. The mornings around here till those meds get in because he has anticipatory anxiety. He is the most unusual child, he has loved school ever since coming to Mountain School and he loves the structure. He doesn't like weekends. He loves school and he is at his happiest at school.



In addition, Shannon talked about how Mountain and Schools Attuned has helped her know how to structure her home so that her boys can feel successful at home.

A lot with Jason is that he knows that he has to work really hard at school and he likes to get it all done there because that is when he is on the medication and he knows if he needs support that he has it. He likes to accomplish it there because it is structured. We have learned to structure things differently in the home. To give him more structure. I know that in the summers I have to structure my summer differently for Jason that I do for the other children.

When Shannon was asked the question: "Because you have this knowledge would you agree that your home is a happier and a more peaceful place?" She responded the following way.

Absolutely! For all of us when we understand and why you understand doesn't always make the behaviors right but you understand it and you could make the changes better. You can be more forgiving of lost papers and organization. His (Jason) organization has improved so much. You learn not to have as much. You learn how to organize your binder. P.J.'s is organized completely different than what Jason's is...Well we quit doing that big binder where you press down to do the little holes. Do you know how much work it is for him to do those little holes? So he has the binder and it is filed so all he has to do is stick the paper down in it. Why didn't I think of that years ago? Where Jason can do it the more traditional way but we have to work on that binder and keep him organized so he is happier. You are frustrated when you can't locate things. It is not just papers and things, it is his shoes. You have strategies for you shoes. Everything is color coded in my

house. The boys all have a color from a toothbrush to a plate; I can tell who didn't eat their food. You start thinking that way. Once you are aware of learning differences and learning styles you start thinking that way. It is not like I know anything you just start thinking that way.

Like Shannon Robin has also made some adjustments at home so life will run smoother.

Maurice has A's but one of the things they always address with him is his difficulty with sequential ordering. They will ask him, Maurice how do you do at home when your mom tells you some things to do? Maurice will say, well after she gets past number two I pretty much forget about it. And they are like ok this is something that is showing up in your work. And so if they didn't have that training and weren't looking for the different strengths and weaknesses they might think he is just being too flippant or he is not reading his paper carefully.

Whereas it is really the way his brain takes in ordering and he is not strong at it. I have worked with him for a couple of years at home and instead of giving him four things I will give him two or three and I will say what have I just asked you to do? So that is a way that I have used some of the stuff that they have told us here (Mountain School) and he doesn't like it. He is annoyed by that. He will say oh I need to go take the trash.....and I will say ok do it and do the right order!

Harriett discusses how homework time at home has been transformed since coming to Mountain School.

At homework time, he (Addison) still doesn't like to do it, but he is much more willing to do it. Or he would hit a point at times and say, oh this is hard I can't do

this and I would say remember you couldn't do this and now you can do this. So it is just being able to help him see that if you keep working at it. Our homework time is much relaxed; both of us are more relaxed. It is less frustrating for both of us to do it. I think for me I didn't feel quite so desperate like I did at the public school if he didn't get it...I still have to help him some. At least now he can usually sit down and start on it (homework). I feel like my role now is less having to teach from scratch but more keeping him on track and helping him understand some of the things he missed.

Harriett deliberated how Addison's social life at home had also been transformed.

Socially he has made friends. He actually this summer he had a boy that he went and did several things together. They spent the night at each others' house. He never had that. That was true of his friend also. His mother was just as thrilled as I was. I feel like before when we had kids over to play it was usually because I knew the mother and I was trying to get some kind of social for him. I see Addison; in general, his social skills are improving. He seems happier, not that he wasn't happy, he has always been happy. I think I see another level of excitement at least he is excited about coming to school. He is not excited about the work.

John talked about how his son seems to be much more content which will definitely seep into his home life. When John was asked if he could tell a difference at home with his son attending Mountain School he responded in this way.

Oh yeah! He seems to be much more content. He doesn't dread coming to school even though this semester he has speech which scares a lot of kids. He was supposed to give some kind of demonstrative speech today so he brought his Wii

with his teacher's permission. Those are the things; he is a little more technically motivated.

Jill like many of the other participants has noticed a transformation in the home especially in homework. She states the following regarding homework.

I don't even check his homework now. I don't check it, he might miss maybe one every once in a while. But that is him that is who he is now, he needs to have that. He doesn't need to have me checking it all of the time. Because he is doing well enough to know that he is going to make mistakes. It is just amazing! His research projects he stays on top of it. It is just amazing that the few tools that this school has given him. Charlie doesn't have major issues it was just something so small with him. It has made a huge difference....It is night and day, we would spend hours on homework and we don't do that now. If he has homework, he whips in and has it done in 10 to 15 minutes. He has the confidence to not run to me and say, check this check this, can you check this?

### *Expenses*

For the most part the participants revealed stories of positive transformations due to their association with Mountain School and Schools Attuned. The following section will reveal how some of the participants have made huge sacrifices for these positive transformations. Their financial lives have been transformed but not always for the better.

The final sub-theme categorized under family transformation is expenses. The expenses that the participants discussed are due to their enrollment in the private school Mountain where the Schools Attuned program is implemented. Mountain school is expensive and the families have had to make monetary sacrifices to help their child.

The participants didn't feel like they were wasting their money at all. They chose to come to Mountain because they felt as though their child would be lost forever without a school such as Mountain. I found it amazing how many of the participants felt as though they were investing their money in their child's future. As I listened to all that they have sacrificed for their child's well-being I recognized that these parents would do whatever it took to create an atmosphere of learning for their child. Kim described the sacrifices.

Mountain School has been stressful because of the tuition. It is 13 grand a year, cash. Now this is the first year they have allowed people to pay with a credit card, this June. It has really been a stress. I feel the stress from Teri's tuition sitting on me all of the time. I know it is a big contributor; I have struggled with depression since I was 30. But this year I started my own business. I am a professional organizer. Looking into high school, ok there are eight tuition payments that is the way we look at her school. We have eight tuition payments that we have to make. So we judge our success financially by how many payments have we paid for now. Like right now with her going into 10<sup>th</sup> grade we are looking at six payments, we have three of those in the bank. I think about those other payments all of the time. We are 47, we have one child out of the house, and he is in the Navy so he is totally taken care of insurance wise and all that stuff.

Kim and her husband have also given up a certain way of life due to the expenses of Mountain School:

Another social stigma that emerges from this situation is we don't have the same lifestyle as people in our same income bracket and socioeconomic strata because

13,000 dollars cash goes out of our home every year. I was in Junior League for 10 years and things like that. Little things like I haven't set foot in Dillard's in 10 years. We still subscribe to our Sunday matinee symphony because half is paid. But there is a lot of stuff we have just let go by the wayside that we don't do with friends. We have a set of friends that say oh lets go to Shreveport for the weekend and we don't do it, because we are just always on the budget. Now I don't gripe about that too much because I know people who have opened up their IRAs to keep their kids at Mountain School. Tom will say, if you can't make this we've got this one little IRA that we have had for years we could open that or use that. We get down to seeing what all our resources are and strategically planning around the tuition. I have told my husband, you are going to laugh but I am dead serious if I have to sell my great grand-mother's silver to keep her at Mountain School I will. That is just what it means to us. I will sack groceries at the local grocery store and wave at my Junior League friends walking by if I have to, to keep her at Mountain. Well, it is what you do when you are a mom. You would do the same thing. You are ready to cut you arm off for your children.

Jill talked about the sacrifices her family has made because of the tuition of Mountain. She also iterated how others question her action of putting Charlie in a private school, partly because of how expensive it is.

That is kind of difficult because our younger son is ill and we do not have health insurance. So have had a lot of major expenses with that was well. So we have really had to be very careful with what we spend and how we spend. We have had some friends question, then why is Charlie in private school? I told them we can't

chose between our children, Rubin's (Jill's other son) health is immediate what is going on with him is immediate. We have to take care of him so that he can have a certain quality of life. I said it is the same with Charlie it is affecting him now and will affect him the rest of his life. If he does not get the tools that he needs now, do I want a child that goes to MIT or do I want a child that goes to TCC?[community college].....Are we going to be some kind of engineer or veterinarian or are we going to be flipping burgers? I mean this is really how we look at it. If you don't have the confidence and those tools on how to figure things out then that affects everything in your life everything.....We've sold our big home. We have moved back into our very first home that my husband and I ever purchased together. So we are living in a 1600 square foot home with two boys and two dogs. We have had to sacrifice things like that. We don't go on vacations, we don't splurge on things. We don't buy big fancy cars. We really have to pay attention to what we have going on. Lots of sacrifices, everything that we do is monitored.....that is it. I mean you know you want to save all this money for him to go to college and then he gets there and can't do the work, what is the point? Once I explain it that way people understand it.

As we ended our conversation Jill made mention that her husband is working three jobs to help keep Charlie enrolled at Mountain School.

Like Jill, Claudia mentioned how she has sacrificed time and money for Rachael's education at Mountain.

But right now our focus is to make sure that Rachael gets what she needs and if that means that I have to commute an hour one way everyday and juggle my schedule and do stuff like this that is what we will do.

Claudia stated that she commutes one hour each way for Rachael to attend Mountain school. She then noted what she and her husband do to make sure Rachael's education is first priority.

We don't live extravagant lives. We don't drive fancy cars. We don't take expensive European vacations. That is what is important to us. This is what we spend our money on. We do want our kids to be involved in certain activities so my boys play basketball. The boys grow out of shoes every six months. We don't buy expensive shoes. We haven't had a true family vacation in about six years. So next Thanksgiving I think we are going to drive with my brother and his family and maybe do Disney World. But we are going to take our lunch everyday and it will be Disney World on a shoe string.

Misty touched upon expenses in her interview. She recognized the fact that other parents have sacrificed for their child to attend Mountain and expressed empathy for their situation. She also briefly explained how they are affording their daughter to be enrolled at Mountain.

I know plenty of people who have done that (sold the farm, so to speak). Who have done that to just get their child there (meaning Mountain). It just causes such a love for the parents, too. That I have for the parents to see you know what they are sacrificing. It just shows how much they really love their children. We are using our college fund now. There are some families who can afford (Mountain)



far more easily than others. That is life. There are definitely families who have spent their retirement or have obtained another job. I don't know if you have interviewed the family, but one family sold their home and bought a much smaller home near the school so that they could afford for their son to attend.

John is also well aware of the financial burdens that Mountain has put on his family. When asked about how Mountain has changed their family he talked a little about the financial side of it.

I think the biggest thing is trying to coordinate the pick up and drop off and I am doing most of it right now. My job is a little more accommodating than hers (his wife) to do the pick ups from school (the Stevens live a good distance from the school). Financially it was different. We ended up pulling money out of a 401 loaning it to ourselves from her 401K so she is paying herself back but normally you are supposed to use to purchase a major purchase. So we took a loan out for most of the tuition and we have to come up with the other part. We took out 50,000 dollars to pay for four years of his school here. It is just like college.

#### Schools Attuned Driving the School Culture

Mountain School, as explained in the beginning section of chapter four, is a small private school that enveloped the philosophy of the professional development program, Schools Attuned. Throughout the interviews all of the participants linked together Schools Attuned and Mountain School. Usually they didn't talk about one without talking about the other. As many of the quotes reflect the idea of Mountain embracing an accepting, empowering, and learning culture; the reader asks the question is it because of Schools Attuned?

This question was thought about and reflected upon throughout all of the interviews. One of the participants, Misty, who has participated on both ends as a parent and as an educator stated the following in regards to the understanding of the partnership between Schools Attuned and Mountain School.

I think Schools Attuned is the umbrella of it all. I think that the mind set that Schools Attuned fosters is what fosters the overall atmosphere of feeling like teachers are going to look for strengths in students whether it is in an awards ceremony or if they lose a game they are still celebrating. I think Schools Attuned fosters the idea of parents and teachers working together and parents, teachers, and students working together. Parents being able to talk about things because it really fosters the whole idea of we are here for these children and it takes all of us. It takes the student and this is the overall format that we are using but this is what we are doing.

Because Schools Attuned includes social; that in one of the constructs. That includes social so you are looking at that social dynamic with how does this student relate to others and then how can the teacher or the parent relay information to the student. Because when they are younger it is more the parent and the student kind of handling these things for the child. Then when they get to middle school sharing the information with them and introducing them to it. Then in high school they have been hearing it, they have been actually doing it and maybe they didn't know it. Then becoming fully aware of it in high school.

Misty explains how she believes Schools Attuned drives the school culture at Mountain and embodies the full child and their parents or caregivers. The four sub-themes are; Acceptance, Empowerment, Partnership, and Hope.

### *Acceptance*

At Mountain School both students and parents are allowed to be themselves. They are not socially penalized or ostracized because their child learns differently. The students feel good about their achievements and are not scared to be different. This type of feeling can foster growth both academically and socially. Kim discusses how the culture at Mountain reflects accepting people.

We did not have instantaneous, look how well she is doing. But why I still pay that incredible tuition amount for every year it is the atmosphere of it is no big deal. Yeah your kid's brain is a little cockeyed it is no big deal, what is the problem. Teri all of the sudden was normal she had friends. That first year was the first time, within two days, well the first day she went was like I don't want to go, I don't want to change. Because she is scared of change it takes her so long to get over a learning curve in a new situation. Where you and I might get comfortable moving to a new town in three months, six months whatever, for her it would be a year and a half. Going to a new church, a new grocery store, whatever it is it always takes her three times longer than it takes somebody else. The second day of school she came home and said, I love Mountain School. Teri adored school through third grade and fourth grade when she started crying, don't make me go to school today mom, something was wrong, So at Mountain School it wasn't the grades but it was everything else. We had a happy child. We had a

child who looked forward to going to school. She loved everything and everybody about her school. She was just a regular girl.

Kim also spoke about Schools Attuned and Mountain School as Misty. She believed it is an atmosphere and thinking that Schools Attuned teaches. It is a specific culture that is purposely created by the Schools Attuned philosophy and training.

It is all of the above. I think it is a staff and faculty that realize that these kids aren't broken. It is not that there is something wrong with them. At Mountain School the condition of your child's brain no longer reflects on your blood or your parenting ability or your quality as a human being. That is one thing the stigma is gone. The fact that the teachers are well trained to deal with all this stuff doesn't make your child's presence in their class a burden.

I loved being at Mountain because the other parents could understand. I felt lonely at Tree Elementary like I said I wasn't being invited into the mommy tree house and other parents hadn't got a clue what I was going through or the issues my child was facing.

Robin discussed how her two sons can be who they truly are and the school appreciates their unique traits.

Tom's very much a character. He is very funny he is very out spoken. This school has been wonderful for him because they appreciate how he is. Whereas if he were at another school they might just think he is a big mouth smart ass and that kind of thing. Whereas here (Mountain School) there is somebody for everybody. Some of them work better with another person. Tom will really like someone that a lot of the kids may not like.

In answer to your question I do think it is a combination the setting, I think it is a combination of how the administration works with them the people that are in charge of each division are outstanding. I mean all three divisions the people in charge are great. So I think it is just that whole trickle down theory just smart, looking over everybody making sure the kids are completely looked at as a whole person.

Robin went on to say that the teachers at Mountain make the students aware of their strengths and weaknesses. They did not look at their weaknesses in a negative way but allowed the students to be real with themselves and find ways to build upon those weaknesses so they might be improved The teachers at Mountain were allowing the students to see past their weaknesses and helping them to implement tools that will overpower those weaknesses.

Tom had to write a paper about his strengths and weaknesses So they are really making these kids aware; and it is not in a way that they will dwell on I am stupid or whatever. What it does because they are following Schools Attuned and because they are really signifying ok it doesn't mean you are stupid. If math is tough for you lets look at what might be hurting your math abilities. It is a great tool for them to not just blanket think, oh I can't do this; I just don't do well on written work.

Robin shared a great example of how her son became accepting of himself; he was assigned to write a paper with the sole purpose of the subject: "My Strengths and Weaknesses." It is a well written paper that describes how Tom views his strengths and weaknesses. He ended the paper with the following paragraph,

My strengths sometimes don't explain my weaknesses such as my great ability to read and my bad grammar. Some strengths may also be a weakness, but I have found a way around them and am able to succeed in academia. Strengths and weaknesses do not make a person. What makes a person is the way that they use their strengths to overcome their weaknesses.

Misty remembered the feelings of frustration before Mountain School when her daughter was never recognized at awards day. She stated that the atmosphere at Mountain allows for her daughter to be herself and also be awarded for it:

Every year in school there is an awards day. Over the six years it was basically the same students every year. What is so wonderful about Mountain School and I did this as a teacher too. We would present awards to students with the highest GPA which very often is a group of five or six students who are always right there at the top. But then we would present awards for growth, for effort, and for good attitude. We really tried to award students in different ways. A lot of times these might not be the students who, and often they aren't the students who have top grades. But we are trying to award kids in other ways. I think that can definitely be done in the public school.

John felt as though his son is at least accepted at Mountain School.

I think he is at least accepted. Because all of the kids here learn a little bit differently; there isn't, I guess, a mainstream portion of it. Everybody learns you know whether it is dyslexia, dysgraphia, or aspergers or some form of autism. Whatever they have got, nobody puts them down for what they are. Because they all have a little bit of a difference and I think that helps them see that well I am

not quite like that person but I am different this way. So they all realize that there is a little bit of difference between all of them. So it is a little more socially acceptable.

As Kim discussed earlier it was helpful for her to meet other parents that had a child somewhat like her own. It is important for parents to be real and open with each other so there is not a feeling of being alone and singled out. Harriett also shared the same sentiments. She felt as though Mountain fosters an atmosphere for parents to be real with each other and walk with each other on a very intense journey.

I feel like the Mountain School really does care about parents' participation. Here I feel like they really are trying to serve my child. It also helped me to meet other parents and what problems they had and also what things they had figured out to do to help. Like the other night there were a couple of parents at the second or third grade table that were asking, does it get better, we just feel like nothing is working? Some of the parents in the middle school and high school section said yes, it finally did click and it does get better. It is helpful to hear that, that hope. To meet other parents and get to know them in a way as other resources or for advice or to know that you are not alone, you are not the only person. Which is how I often felt in the public schools that no one really understood. Because it tended to be the parents, usually moms that were really active at the school, of the high achieving kids or the ones that were not struggling. So they really didn't, not that they were unsympathetic, they really couldn't understand.

Kasi summed up her feelings about this theme in a single sentence, "It is the atmosphere and people are accepted for who they are."

### *Empowerment*

The atmosphere at Mountain driven by the force of Schools Attuned empowers not only the students but their parents as well. As discussed previously, it teaches the parents how to recognize the learning difference in their child and gives them the tools to succeed with that learning difference. Knowing this information and feeling accepted in their school community gives the family as a whole a new lease on life. They no longer feel like a second class citizen but ones that can find peace with whom their child is and who they are as a parent. This is an empowering feeling. Shannon beautifully stated how she feels empowered by the culture of Mountain:

I have seen such changes at Mountain School. As I told you I want that opportunity for every teacher because I think of myself as a teacher who didn't understand about learning and how I could have helped my students. Teachers that I meet outside of Mountain School I want to give them the opportunity. In Matt's work I have met teachers that this summer stayed in my home, a teacher from Mississippi that I met her and I told her about Schools Attuned gave her Dr. Levine's book *A Mind at a Time*. I invited her to stay here and go through the training, I paid for her training. Matt has said we can't train everybody that you meet but what we can do is change the way people view children that learn differently. So that is what I feel like that Matt and I can do. Hopefully we encourage people that might think that children with learning differences that are at the bottom tier that they are not. They are bright children. With the right strategies with teachers who are trained can achieve their goals. When their



weaknesses and also their strengths are identified and they are engaged with teachers who realize well this teaching method isn't working with this child we will go with a different angle we will teach differently. It has just totally changed our lives.

As Shannon mentioned, that she feels empowered to tell others about Schools Attuned. She wants all children to have the same possibilities as her two sons. She continued her thoughts in the following statement.

I don't know what would have happened to Jason. When you have a child that is diagnosed as suicidal in the second grade the thought of it just really, that is why this program is so important and yes every teacher must be trained. That is how I feel. I mean I wonder where Jason would be with out it?

Jill commented how others have even noticed a difference in her son, Charlie. Her comments are a summary of how she felt empowered by Charlie's progression and the overall impact of Schools Attuned coupled with Mountain School.

I think that with Charlie he was so stressed about not doing everything 100% right that he concentrated on that so much and saw himself as a failure even though he is making grades and proving he is not a failure. I think he saw himself as that so he didn't think very highly of himself and would get frustrated.

Like if he was to read something and something that he thought he totally understood and he got and would write a report and then turn around and make a B on it. He worked so hard to get to that point. I just think that kind of held him back.

But being here it has been amazing. He is very well liked, he talks to people, he does things, he plays sports, and it has just really made him a different person.

The following words from Jill also showed how both Jill and her son feel empowered to move on with life and are confident in the tools that Schools Attuned has provided them.

Like I said before I have asked Charlie things are going really good maybe we should just stay at Mountain. Because we were planning on his eighth grade year being his last year and going on to high school in public. I am ok where he is at. He is doing good and making good grades, I am real comfortable with everything. He said no I think I will be good. That was almost more amazing than him wanting to stay because to me, I thought wow that means he has got confidence now. He knows he can do this. He knows that he can handle that. That is what we were wanting. Yet I was comfortable with how well he was doing, that I almost forgot to look at the big picture of why we are here. I feel very confident that if we were to go into a public setting right now he would do extremely well.....The other thing is that Charlie just being able to see his strength to do it!

### *Partnership*

Because of the attitude of the Schools Attuned philosophy and how it affects the culture of the school, parents feel that they have a true partnership with the school and the teachers. Many of the parents that were interviewed had a feeling of us and them before enrolling at Mountain School. Many felt as though what they thought or wanted didn't matter to the school officials. Schools Attuned has developed a bridge that links the school and parents together. Misty, a parent and teacher at Mountain, explained the steps

she took to help parents understand the reasoning behind some of the ideas associated with Schools Attuned and to build a stronger bridge with her parents.

In Schools Attuned, one of the first skills that you learn as an English teacher especially for reading is the use of the highlighter. How important a highlighter is as a study skills tool. The first year that I taught there (at Mountain) I required them. One little boy didn't bring his highlighter so he did not get a discipline but he did receive a warning because they need those highlighters. I received this really angry letter from the dad, why do we need a highlighter I do not understand? So I just very kindly typed a nice little letter in response and explained and he said oh thank you for the explanation I didn't know. He said and I see how this will help my son. So he had a highlighter from that day on.

Misty went on to tell about how that bridge is built.

It begins in middle school with informing the parents about how Schools Attuned works. The conferences, the students don't attend those and Cathy would not attend those conferences. It was information teaching the parents and informing them of how all of this if put together and how their child's weaknesses and strengths show up and setting goals together with the teachers. I think that the parents really need to have an understanding of that so they can help their child as well, at home. So it is collaboration between the teacher and the parent in middle school.

John stated how his son Jared was having trouble with socialization and he felt as though he could talk with his son's teachers and try to come up with some type of resolution for the dilemma.

Bring it to the attention of the teachers and they work with that. When we sat down to set parameters and goals for our conferences we go through some of those. Some of the teachers, typically homeroom teachers where it goes through and she disseminates the information to the other teachers. With Jared it is working towards more of the planning phase and socialization, trying to get him to interact with others a little bit more often.

John also deliberated how he is aligning with the teachers to work on tasks at school and in the home.

Question: Do you think the teachers here have addressed him being able to live independently, getting him ready for life after school?

Mr. Stevens: I don't know if they addressed that as much as they could. I guess they did in some ways, they did turn around and say Jared you are responsible for getting this done, if you have issues you need to come and see me. I know that was said from on of the teachers from the last conference. If you have questions that is what we are here for. You have to make your choices you have to make you decisions but if you don't know what is going on or if you have questions you have to own it. So they are trying to do a little bit more of that and we do that at home as well; trying to make sure that he stays on task with certain things.

Harriett mentioned her feeling of partnership in the following statement.

Before Mountain School there was big tension that was developing between me, the teachers, and the administrators. Here I don't feel that, I feel like we are more on the same team. Here they don't seem to resent that I want to help and there they did seem to get to the point of no let us take care of it and I am thinking but

you aren't doing enough let me help. They were kind of well you can do anything you want but we aren't going to support you or give you any ideas.

Harriett explained the process she has been active in at Mountain that has better built that bridge of partnership.

This particular one (parent workshop) was based on Schools Attuned. There is like a series of six and they are called Learning about Learning. They are aimed at working with the parents to explain what these concepts Schools Attuned are based upon. The people that led them have been trained to do this. This one was on homework. They had handouts for us. They had us broken in similar grade areas. They had second and third together, fourth and fifth, sixth and seventh, and then there was a table for middle school and high school. Not as many of them showed up. But they do try to cover some of the terminology that is used in Schools Attuned. They had us do some exercises that showed us, they had us do a problem-solving exercise in our groups and it showed that some people could think, because you had to be able to think specially to answer it and some groups could do that and others had great difficulty with it. That kind of showed us what are kids are going through.....I was real impressed that they do these parents education programs. They really are parents' education programs, our PTA at the other school and the program were not really that helpful.

Claudia described how she helps the teachers build personal goals for her daughter. Working on the goals at home in conjunction with school only helps to strengthen that bridge of partnership.

That is one of the goals that we are working on this year is for her to be able to be an advocate for herself instead of her family stepping up for her all the time. So that is one of the things we are working on. We want her to be able to say, ok I don't understand this. Because a lot of times she just wouldn't say anything. That is what got her in trouble in the public schools too.

That is another reason at the parent/teacher conference we set goals together. So if Rachael needs organization than they are going to say, ok Rachael your book bag looks a little messy tomorrow when you bring that I want it all cleaned up and organized. Oh yes they know the specific goals. They may change over the years. The next parent/teacher conference we may come back and say you know this is really not working. What can we do different? The school also emphasizes parent/teacher conferences to help both the parents and teachers focus on the same goals for the student.

Like Claudia, Kasi has also felt a culture of partnership. She explained how she has been apart of that mythical pyramid (teacher, student, and parent) to help mold Clinton's education.

He has been able to do both (athletics and academics) and I have been able to have both sides work together to meet in the middle for that pyramid. We have a coach, a teacher, and us to get him to where he needs to be to both.

Not only has Kasi been part of the partnership equation but Clinton has also had a say in his educational experience. The triangle that Kasi talked about during her interview emphasizes the student as a partner in his/her own educational process.

This year I am making him set goals. Most of the time his teacher has set his goals but this year when I got in the first conference I said, they are not my goals, they are his goals. So he has to set his goals on what he wants to accomplish each time because I am not going to be the one to accomplish the goals. So I have tried to put it back on him, on what do you think you need additional help on? I will intercede with you but I need to know what you need because I am not the one coming to school everyday.

Tony also emphasized how partnership is evident within the Mountain School culture.

There is a lot of parental involvement. I would say every parent is involved to some degree there. It is a whole team working together, it is not just the teachers and students and the parents observing. The parents are integrated there; they are helping out at home. They come up there and volunteer. We had a lot of volunteer efforts to get moved into the new building. It is almost like a family.

### *Hope*

The final theme from the interviews is the message of hope for the future.

Whether it was verbally announced or the body language displayed by the participants, all of the participants felt hope for their children. A famous quote talks about without hope our hearts would die. These parents have found hope and hope is what fuels the engine for all mankind.

Claudia addressed her feelings regarding the educational experience for her daughter and the hope that she has received.

Like I said there will be things that we don't like about it but overall this is the best place for Rachael and she is thriving. We don't have the issues that we had

while in the public schools. We do not have them. In fact if we could afford to send my boys here I would do that too. Not because they have a learning difference but because the environment is something that I think is best. It is the best learning environment that I think you can have.

Robin expressed the following about how the Mountain School culture has given kids hope.

I think here these kids do get to feel some sense of accomplishment. No matter how small it is some kids here would never feel it somewhere else get to feel it here. Even if it is something like an art project that is put out on the wall. Even if it is you know when a parent comes in for a conference and they are told these things and they go home and say you are doing a great job in math. You have come up from a C. I don't know that they get that at the other schools. I could be wrong. But from my take on it I don't think they do.

Kasi discussed how she has hope that her son Clinton will be able to continue his education beyond his secondary schooling years. She attributes this to the Mountain and the educators at the school.

It would have been a future goal for him but not as strong. I don't think he would have made it out of the first year or the first semester. I don't think he would have made it that far. I think now his level of confidence and asking for help and getting the help and knowing that the help is there he is going to school. Yes, he is definitely getting the tools that he needs here. It really did start here because they are the ones that are pushing him to say you can go to school and you can do it but you have got to do this, this, and this first. So they are helping him know that



you can do this and you can do it along as you do what I am giving you and that is what has helped him. Other than that he wouldn't have gone to school.

Shannon summarized up her feelings about how her experience at Mountain has given her hope in the following statement.

It is more than just understanding life right now, helping us with our life right now. They are helping us beyond. They let you dream. They let you dream there.

Kim found hope in the actions of the teachers at Mountain School. She felt as though they are preparing her daughter for the real world.

Another thing about Mountain School is they get to Mountain School and they go well I didn't turn in my essay on time because I have dysgraphia and it takes me so long to write. The teacher and everybody else in the school goes so, suck it up. Out there in the real world planes, trains, and buses are not going to listen to you because you are chronologically challenged. Mountain is preparing your child to function in a world out there that doesn't give a sweet darn what your challenges are. It is never going to accommodate you. You are going to have to learn accommodate the rest of the world that is the way it works. It is brutal, brutal truth delivered with love.

John believed that Mountain School has given him and his son hope by providing opportunities for Jared to "step out of his comfort zone." John explained what opportunities have been presented in the following words.

I think they have a pretty good grasp on it (Jared's Aspergers). Obviously everyone thinks no one is good enough to teach their own child to get a 100% of the way. But I think they make an effort to understand and try to work with the

parameters that are given and then say here is where we want to try and stretch his socialization. Getting him to step out of this little box is a hard thing....

Last year at the end of the year the high school students take a bus ride (at Mountain School) down to Schlitterbahn. He was real nervous to go last year because he really hadn't been out alone without mom, dad, grandma, or grandpa or something like that for any length of time other than best friend's house. So taking a day trip was a little bit of a step out of the box for him.

Jill stated the hope she has for her son Charlie regarding him learning how to do his homework in a setting that doesn't have to be silent. To Jill this is huge; she feels that he can now function in the real world with this tool.

Before it had to be very quiet in his bedroom, he couldn't do anything but now he is able to do his homework at the kitchen table while I am up doing stuff. It is like his brain is being retrained. It is being trained ok you are getting this information and everything is working and you are knowing what is going on it is ok that we have had a little noise going on. Because he is going to have to; that is just life. I mean you can't sit in a quiet room all your life.

Like Kasi, Misty has the hope of her daughter, Cathy pursuing a college degree. As she explained below this hope was not real before Mountain School.

Oh my goodness, when Cathy first came to the Mountain School and even up until last year my husband and I were just very concerned that she might not be able to attend college or that she might only be able to attend a year or so. We just didn't know. We feel very confident that she is going to be able to attend college a four year university. We feel that it will be important for her to attend one that

still has some sort of study skills program that she can check in with. But we feel that she is going to understand herself and we will understand her. Even if we are four hours a part on the telephone we can say, now remember we can walk her through some things. She has the skills that she needs.

Cathy continued and explained how the teachers gave her hope when she didn't have it.

She had several wonderful teachers but two really stand out. Because Mrs. Hill and so many others they had been trained in this (Schools Attuned). They knew what was going on. They helped her get through it. They did not respond to her as teacher in middle school did just writing her off. They kept the hope sometimes even when I didn't have it they did....I really shutter to think what would have happened (if we hadn't put Cathy in Mountain School). I know from teaching at public junior highs and even teaching junior high in the private school the road that a lot of junior high kids take meaning that especially if they are as depressed and unhappy as my child was. The way she went from anorexia to cutting on herself. That she could have easily gotten into drugs, alcohol, or sex. She was deeply searching for acceptance.

Tony expressed the hope he has for Gary in the following statement.

Yes it definitely has. I have confidence that he is going to be able to overcome these difficulties and he will be reading and able to contribute to society. You can define success in a lot of ways I think he will be a successful person. He has got a lot of very positive character qualities that we want to continue to encourage.

Not only has Tony been given hope but in the following statement it is evident how Gary has tasted hope in ability to now read.

I know a number of times recently he has read something on a sign and said, look dad I can read that. You can tell his eyes brighten and I can no longer flip through the T.V. channels without him saying, hey there is Sponge Bob dad stop. I used to be able to flip right through something that I knew he would want to watch before he would have time to read it....He has seen that it is a powerful tool.

#### SUMMARY

The findings of this study were reported in chapter IV. The findings reveal that Schools Attuned coupled with Mountain School transformed parents and students in positive ways. Before the students enrolled in Mountain School there seemed to be much stress within the family. The stress stemmed from lagging behind in academics or the students just “falling through the cracks” and not even being noticed. The stress also came from social barriers that were presented at the former schools for students as well as parents.

The findings were both expected and unexpected. I was not surprised that a program like Schools Attuned was successful in the transformation of these families. This program is an educational tool that has trained teachers to learn how to cope and teach students who have learning differences. Most of the time when teachers are given the appropriate tools and a solid foundation they can learn to teach and adapt to students who might learn differently. I was not surprised that the parents liked the atmosphere at Mountain, a place where it is positive and engaging. Most parents would like to have their child at a school with this type of philosophy and also the one on one attention received because of the classroom sizes. Having taught in the public schools and having a

daughter in first grade I hear many parents complain about the class sizes in our public schools today.

On the other hand I was surprised at how much the parents and students enjoyed being at a school only for students with learning differences. The parents and students felt accepted and no longer an outcast. So much of my special education background discusses the importance of the “Least Restrictive Environment” and mainstreaming students whenever possible. Much research shows how students with learning differences need to be placed with their non-disabled peers. My study implies the opposite. The parents of my study proved to be much happier when they were among others like themselves.

I will discuss in chapter V what could be done in public schools today to help transform other parents such as the interview participants, more specifically what I would do as a principal to make my school a place like Mountain where students with learning differences would benefit academically and socially. I will also discuss ideas for further research in chapter V.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*Every student can learn,  
just not on the same day,  
or the same way.*

- George Evans

#### SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to research the question, what happens to families when they become engaged with the Schools Attuned program? The insights that I gained from this question are powerful. The families that were interviewed are ordinary people that wanted a quality education for their child. They weren't asking for the world but for a school that would simply recognize their child's learning differences and teach them the tools to make them productive citizens. They were seeking a school that accepted their children for who they were socially and academically.

The gathering of data was not only guided by the main research question, stated above but also by the following sub-questions:

1. Describe the culture that Schools Attuned emphasizes and how has this ideal impacted your family?
2. How has the Schools Attuned program helped the parents become involved in their child's education

3. How has the Schools Attuned program affected the relationship between the child and parents?
4. Has the information learned through Schools Attuned carried over to other siblings and family member?

These questions opened the doors for the participants to dig much deeper than just the subject of Schools Attuned. Schools Attuned was the vehicle through which I as the researcher was able to develop the powerful emerging themes presented in chapter four. These emerging themes have brought attention changes that need to be made in our American school system.

This study was guided by critical theory. Through a critical theory lens individuals, who in the past have had a silent voice, are given a chance to tell their stories. This study opens the doors to voices that may have been silenced. As Welch (2000) argues in her book, we must eliminate charity to the oppressed and grant justice for there to actually be peace. When people are treated justly they begin to take ownership and create successes in their lives. When they are taught how to learn and how to truly understand their learning ability they begin to lead a new life (Welch, 2000). Many times educators just help students get by and offer an easy or watered down curriculum so that students aren't a bother (Sizer, 2004). But if educators could take the time to truly listen to the stories and experiences of the lives of their students and parents a new learning could take place.

As discussed in Chapter II, this study was conducted using phenomenological inquiry. By using this form of inquiry I was able to uncover valuable experiences from families who have children with learning differences. As Van Manen (1991) states,

“Education needs to turn back to the world of experience. Experience can open up understanding that restores a sense of embodied knowing” (p. 9). Throughout Chapter V, I am going to apply the experiences learned from the interviews to education and schools. These applications could be linked to any building because human needs are universal. These applications could help any administrator build a sense of community and understanding for families that have children who have learning differences. Some of the suggestions may not work in public schools due to federal law but the ideals and thought behind the implications could be applied in certain situations.

Chapter V is divided into the following sections:

- Building Parent Trust
  1. The Use of Labels
  2. Providing Partnership
- Teacher Education
  1. Teacher Reflection
  2. Teacher Research
  3. Pre-Service Teachers
- Building a Climate of Victory
- Recommendations and Discussion for Further Research
  - Effectiveness of Mainstreaming
  - The Use of Labels in Special Education
- Recommendations for Replication



## BUILDING PARENT TRUST

### The Use of Labels

As schools begin to build parents' trust parents must first feel accepted. As I began interviewing parents I quickly learned that labeling a child is not positive. During my first couple of interviews I used the term "learning disability" and I was quickly corrected by the parents. More than one of the interview participants stated "We don't use that term at Mountain School; we use the term learning difference." This term began to make more sense to me because these children were not disabled which has a negative connotation, but they just had a different way of learning. By the end of the interviews I was no longer referring to their children as learning disabled. I did this out of respect for the parents and to build an alliance of trust.

For schools to do the same they should look at the vocabulary used when referring to individuals with learning disabilities. Labels often imply a problem and that someone is weird. As Kim (interview participant) states in her biography, "This experience was just the first of referrals, testing, and an assortment of acronyms like ARD, IEP, CAPD, CIPD, CA, MA, EMR, and of course LD." Parents get exhausted by all of these labels. They want to be normal and refer to their child by his/her name instead of an acronym. Kim goes on to state, "Another blessing of Schools Attuned was an atmosphere of *normalcy*. Since Mountain School was exclusively for students with learning differences, it was normal to be different there."

Levine (2002) implies the following concerning the labeling of children: "The labels are pessimistic. They imply you're pretty much always going to be the way you

are, that you will have these problems for the rest of your life if you suffer them now” (p. 328). He goes on to state:

Instead of labeling the children, it is more helpful and humanistic to label the phenomena with which they are contending. So, instead of calling Susan an LD kid, we acknowledge that she is a child who is having trouble with her awareness of language sounds in words, and that is making it hard for her to acquire reading skills. (p. 328)

If students were identified by their specific learning difference such as the example above, than general classroom teachers would have a better handle on how to present material to the student and specific teaching techniques to better meet the needs of students. Instead of just clumping special needs students together by labels schools need to truly recognize their neurological differences and teach to those.

#### Providing Partnership

Not only do parents want their child looked at as an individual with a name but the data from the interviews showed an overwhelming feeling by the parents that they were grasping for help and information before going to Mountain School and becoming involved with Schools Attuned. One of the artifacts given by Kim (interview participant) showed how she as a mom was grasping for advice when trying to get her daughter to do homework. The following note was given to one of Teri’s (Kim’s daughter) teachers while attending the public school:

Dear Mrs. B,

We just completed an hour in tears over homework. The conversation went like this:

Daughter: I don't want to do my homework! (also "Its' stupid!", "It's boring!", "I hate it!")

Kim: I hated my homework too. But it's something we have to do.

Daughter: (in tears) No!

Kim: If you don't do it today, you'll have to do it tomorrow at recess.

Daughter: (louder tears) No!

Kim: Then do you want to do it today?

Daughter: (crying...nods "yes")

Kim: Then let's get out of my lap, and into your chair.

Daughter: No! I don't want to do my homework!

(repeat entire dialog for an hour)

This note signifies how Kim needed help in assisting Teri.

The participants that I interviewed wanted the tools to help their children. If schools would take the time to teach parents how to help their children, parents would feel more accepted and trusting of the school. As discussed in Chapter II, parents often have the need for advice, support, information, and practical help when dealing with a child who has a learning disability (Russell, 2003). For parents to have this need met, the schools must define their ideals for parent partnership.

There are many vehicles in which schools get parents involved. Those include PTA, fundraising, helping in the work room, volunteering in the classroom for specific activities, general PTA meetings, booster clubs, volunteering at book fairs, and the list could keep going. All of these activities are important for the school and these needs must be met or the school will not be successful and thrive. Chavkin (2001) states,

It is critical to specify what results you are seeking with the partnership effort. It needs to be clear whether the goal is student achievement, a better school climate, or more community support. When one looks at results and outcomes, it is important to acknowledge that different types of activities within partnerships lead to different outcomes for the students, parents, and educators, especially in the short term. (p. 90)

Schools should have various goals when determining the need for parent partnership. There need to be different subgroups for partnership. Once the building administrator defines these subgroups, there should be a group only for parents who have children with learning differences. These parents should not be limited to ones that are receiving special education services, but parents who need that extra attention and help to learn how to reach their child academically and socially. This subgroup could also be thought of as a school within a school.

Many schools fear that parents would feel ostracized or set apart by creating a subgroup of this nature. I think each school would be different and that should be determined by the building administrators. It is my belief that most parents would be appreciative of this partnership and thrive from the information gained. According to the findings of this study, parents wanted to feel accepted and felt comfortable around others in similar situations. Harriett (interview participant) states, “It might have been better if we had been in a different school that had more kids that were struggling and different administrators.”

This subgroup could meet with school administrators, learning specialists, and others that have much interest in learning differences. For example Mountain School had

monthly parent education meetings. These meetings were a very popular service for the Mountain School parents. These meetings equipped families and taught them how to best help their child. Harriett (interview participant) was seeking parent education from the public school where her son Addison was attending. She would attend the PTA meetings but found no support at these meetings. She makes the following comments,

If you went to the general meetings they just basically read reports, there was discussion. Sometimes they would have the kids come sing and that would be the program. I don't really consider those educational programs.

She continues her thoughts and discusses her feelings about Mountain School's programs for parents, "I was real impressed that they do these parents' education programs. Like we had one Tuesday night for the parents on homework." It is obvious that Harriett wanted the school to recognize her needs as a parent who has a child with a learning difference.

These parents need to be a target population for partnership. Often in schools the high achieving students are the ones that have parents involved. Kim (interview participant) discusses this point when comparing her experiences with her son and daughter.

I went through school as David's mommy and I was in the top mommy tree house. I was PTA board, room mom, very involved and everybody knew me. Four years later doing it with Teri and the uber mommies don't talk to me. I am not invited to be room mom. I could tell a difference as to when I was David's mom and when I was Teri's mom.

These parents should feel wanted, and the school should clearly state that they are seeking a partnership with parents who have children with learning differences. When this expectation is visible the school should provide various learning opportunities for this partnership and other activities that might be appropriate to strengthen the trust between the school and parent. When this type of bond is created, parents will begin to take ownership in their school and trust that the school is highly concerned about the well being of their child (Adams, Forsyth, and Mitchell, 2009).

### TEACHER EDUCATION

For schools to have a partnership with a specific population as described above teachers need to be aware and have a true understanding of the targeted population. Throughout the interviews the participants discussed the frustrations that they encountered because of the lack of teacher preparation for their child's needs. I believe that teachers want to help all types of students. For this goal to become a reality the school needs to have an instructional leader that will make this happen. The instructional leader may need to redesign the venues of professional development that is provided for the teachers. In every school there will be a need for teachers to have a background in learning disabilities/differences. Once training teachers how to deal with students who have a learning disability is a priority for professional development, teachers will begin to feel confident in their teaching methodologies and their interactions with parents.

## Teacher Reflection

Schools Attuned is an avenue that school leaders could pursue to build foundations in learning disabilities but this program will not cure all problems. Before any program can be implemented an atmosphere and culture of learning needs to be present. Blase and Blase (1998) discuss the importance of teacher reflection when creating an atmosphere of learning. They state the following, “Reflection allows you to think about and to evaluate your strategies” (p. 93). When teachers learn how to reflect upon their lessons they think about and evaluate their strategies. Teacher reflection will allow teachers to identify students who need extra help and attention and how a lesson could be redesigned to benefit all of the students. Reflection will also enable the teacher to notice specific traits exhibited by their students. As these traits begin to surface a specific plan could be developed by the teacher to help individual students.

One of the interview participants, reflected upon her career as a teacher before being trained in Schools Attuned. Misty (interview participant) who can identify as a parent and teacher stated the following about teacher preparation.

When I taught in public schools I didn't have training. I think had I had some training even if it wasn't enough for me to know exactly what to do with this child. I think it would had been enough for me to understand that this child is struggling and needs my help; some how or some way, just something, I did have classes with thirty and thirty-two students and when I reflect back it touches me and I think I have done it. I have been the teacher who didn't know.

Instructional leaders must make sure all of their teachers know how to instruct students with learning differences. As Misty, stated just knowing a little bit would have

been most helpful. School leaders should begin to build bridges in their schools that will allow teachers to reflect upon their teaching practices. In doing this teachers need to meet together to share observations and reflect upon the following activities,

- Recalling student behaviors from a class
- Comparing actual and desired student performance
- Making inferences
- Analyzing effects of teacher behaviors and making causal connections
- Evaluation appropriateness of teaching strategies
- Reflecting on one's thought process
- Prescribing alternative strategies
- Employing met cognition (reflecting on, understanding, and controlling one's learning). (Blase and Blase, 1998, p. 97)

These activities will allow learning to take place and build a foundation so that specific educational programs such as Schools Attuned could be implemented in the school.

### Teacher Research

Another tool that would be helpful for teachers when learning how to work with students who have learning differences and goes hand in hand with teacher reflection is teacher research. Teacher research is a vehicle to make good teachers better. Loughran (2002) defines teacher research "as practitioners who attempt to better understand their practice, and its impact on their students, by researching the relationship between teaching and learning in the world of work" (p. 3). If teachers don't research on their own, how will they makes changes to their curriculum or find ways to reach all students. Teacher research empowers teachers and helps them gain a better understanding of their



own teaching practices and its effect on students. Through teacher research teachers will begin to develop more reflective practices. As Darling-Hammond (1997) states in her book, “Nearly all [teachers she interviewed] (84 percent) said the most important attributes of good teachers include an ability to relate to and motivate students and to adapt teaching to students needs” (p. 81).

The idea of teachers learning to treat each student as an individual is the philosophy behind teacher research. When teachers begin to do this they will recognize the differences in their students and learn how to research better teaching practices for each student. Hubbard and Power (1999) discusses how Lawrence Stenhouse compares teacher researchers to a “careful gardener.” The careful gardener wants each of his plants to grow and thrive. He treats each of his plants as individuals. He knows how each one will grow and what to do to treat them. This idea of a careful gardener is how an ideal teacher researcher should be looked at. Not like a scientist in a lab staring down at his research subject but a human being in the midst of teaching, carefully weighing the value of different ways of teaching and learning (1999).

An excellent strategy to use during teacher research is what a teacher at Mountain School did with her students. The teacher assigned each student to write a formal paper about their strengths and weaknesses. Through this paper the teacher was able to research her own students by reading their own thoughts of what they determined as their positive and negative attributes. This paper is an excellent source and helps identify how students learn as well. Many students know what gives them trouble academically but they may just need someone to listen to them. They may not know the correct terms to use for their learning difference but they know when and how they get confused and aggravated. The

following excerpt was taken out of a students' paper given to me as an artifact from one of the interview participants.

I only have a few strengths or weaknesses that I can think about at this moment.

My strengths are my ability to argue, read, and to organize people to get something done. My weaknesses are my grammar skills, my ability to spell and to determine which homonyms to use.

He ends that paper with the following paragraph.

My strengths sometimes don't explain my weaknesses such as my great ability to read and my bad grammar skills. Some strengths may also be a weakness, but I have found a way around them and am able to succeed in academia. Strengths and weaknesses do not make a person. What makes a person is the way that they use their strengths to overcome their weaknesses.

These two paragraphs are powerful research that a teacher could use to help this student be very successful. This student recognizes his strengths and weaknesses. Now the teacher needs to pick up on that and help him use those strengths to overcome the weaknesses. Teachers need to listen to their students and research them to become more attuned with their learning. Shannon (interview participant) discusses this point in the following statement:

He (her son) is a self learner. He has learned how to learn through Schools Attuned. He has been taught how to learn and he knows his learning style. So listen to him and let him teach you how to teach him.

Shannon was not the only parent who implied that their son or daughter could explain to a teacher the way that they learned. Jill (interview participant) states the following,

I think he could probably explain to that teacher, but I honestly don't think that the teacher would do anything about it. I think at that point it will just be all on him. It is going to be on him needing to take that initiative to learn to figure out how he needs to get the information to work for him. I don't feel that they would in any public setting.

The reason that Jill thinks this is because of her past experience in the public school and how public school teachers are over-worked and don't have the time to look at students individually.

Instructional leaders in schools must take the time to teach their faculty how to develop practices such as teacher reflection and teacher research so that they do have time to look at students as individuals. Once tools such as these become common practice an atmosphere of learning will be present for teachers and other educational programs can be implemented that are more specifically aimed toward helping children with learning differences.

#### Pre-service Teachers

I often compare administrators to athletic coaches. A good coach is always recruiting players by seeking them out and maintaining a good program that will attract future players. They also hold many summer camps at their institution that teaches the fundamentals of a sport to a younger generation so that they can begin to produce a crop of young athletes that may be interested in their program someday.

Administrators should do the same. They need to be out in the trenches recruiting teachers who care about reaching out to students and learning about their individual needs. Many colleges and universities need to implement more courses about teaching

students who have learning differences. These courses should be offered to all education majors not just those in the field of special education. As Hechinger (2007) states, “Regular teachers are instructing more children with severe disabilities – often without extra training or support” (p. 1). Research tells us that there needs to be more training for general education teachers (Spinelli, 1998). For example at Oklahoma State University under-graduate students are only required to take one two-hour course on special education. The education courses that pre-service teachers take would be an excellent beginning point for this training.

Building administrators would benefit greatly to go and help teach some of these courses by volunteering to be a guest speaker or teach a study group within the class. If administrators begin to plant seeds in the future generations of teachers than the ideas of teaching to a diverse population will not be foreign to these pre-service teachers upon graduation. Tony (interview participant) discusses the idea of educating teachers in the following statement,

She was pretty young (his son’s teacher) and didn’t know quite what to do. I think she did recognize that he did have struggles. She just didn’t seem to have the skill set yet to know how to guide him and give him the right tools to overcome those things.

It is true that as teachers mature and gain experience than they will have a better handle on their students. But if we start teaching all pre-service teachers about learning disabilities and how to give students the tools to overcome those disabilities then instructional leaders will have a better foundation laid for their future teachers.

If building administrators begin to recruit and educate pre-service teachers they will build a solid program at their school. These grassroots efforts can be successful. It will take extra time and effort on the part of the administrators but doing this will help to recruit and retain teachers who could be strong in and outside the field of special education. These efforts described above could be termed as independent environmental management strategies (Rallis and Goldring, 2000). Rallis and Goldring describe that “Principals of dynamic schools take charge of environmental information as they link the school with the community to facilitate the public relations role in the external environment” (p. 80). Reaching out into the community to educate and attract professional to the arena of education will help future generations of children.

#### BUILDING A CLIMATE OF VICTORY

As discussed above when administrators get involved in the beginning stages of molding teachers, they are building an atmosphere of victory within their building. As mentioned in Chapter IV a common theme throughout the interviews was how Schools Attuned was the driving force behind an accepting, empowering, and hopeful school culture. If I could use one word to sum up these adjectives the word victory comes to mind. The instructional leader has power over the culture of his or her school. Even if Schools Attuned is not implemented, the building administrator can be the driving force of the school culture. Leaders must rethink the structure of the school if change needs to occur. Sergiovanni (2007) discusses the idea of change:

Changing our minds is always tough because of the strong connection between doing and affirmation. Current school practices have been continuously reinforced by the existing theory. As a result, their acceptance has become so automatic that

they are considered to be unquestioned truths. Things are done in a certain way because they are supposed to be done that way. To change, we have to challenge practices that have always appeared sensible, and this is hard to do. (p. 101)

Many of the parents noted how lonely it felt in the public schools because their child was overlooked or not recognized. An example of this feeling was the awards ceremonies that took place at the various public schools, Misty (interview participant) states that “Over the six years it was basically the same students every year.” She goes on to state what could be done differently.

What is so wonderful about Mountain School and I did this as a teacher too. We would present awards to students with the highest GPA which very often is a group of five or six students who are always right there at the top. But then we would present awards for growth, for effort, and for good attitude. We really tried to award students in different ways. I think this can be done in the public schools.

Recognition is an important part of the educational experience. When only the same students receive recognition over and over again, others feel less valued or not accepted. Individual classrooms can begin to award students based upon weekly achievement or growth. Awards could be given for growth in behavior or just small things like helping a peer on the playground. The leadership of the school should make this part of the school culture and plan specific activities that incorporate many types of awards.

This could be modeled through faculty meetings in which the principal picks a different teacher or staff member each week to high light and give an award to. The principal should be specific in why that person is receiving an award. It will take extra

time for the principal to notice a specific trait for each faculty or staff member but this will model an atmosphere of victory for the teachers and they will begin to want to highlight each of their own students.

Creating moments such as these within a school can go a long way with students and parents. Two of the parents, Jill and Tony (interview participants), both beamed with joy as they showed me their child's certificate as they discussed the awards and milestones that their children had reached while attending Mountain. Tony commented that when his son Gary was receiving an award at a Mountain School gathering, "He had a big smile of his face." Jill had to fight back tears as she talked about her son receiving reading awards. These stories and others are real and need to be heard by school officials. The only way we can improve the culture of our schools is by listening and acting upon advice given by the real professionals, the parents of children who have learning differences.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS AND DISCUSSION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As stated at the end of chapter IV, I was most surprised at how much the parents wanted their children to be with others like themselves and not in the mainstream. There is so much research dealing with the Least Restrictive Environment and how the schools should mainstream students as much as possible. The data from the interviews makes me question the importance of the Least Restrictive Environment. Kim (interview participant) makes the following statement in regard to this subject.

It is hard sometimes because society forces me at times to put Teri (Kim's daughter) with kids that are her age chronologically. I am forced to put Teri into

populations chronologically or grade wise that mentally or emotionally she doesn't relate to.

When Kim (interview participant) was asked the question, "Is it best practice to mainstream special education students?" She replied in the following way, "It would not work for us. I would fight tooth and nail not to mainstream Teri (Kim's daughter)." John (interview participant) also has the same sentiments as Kim. He discusses his thoughts toward mainstreaming in the following statement.

I think he (John's son) is at least accepted (at Mountain School). Because all of the kids learn a little bit differently, there isn't, I guess a mainstream portion of it. Whatever they have got, nobody puts them down for what they are. So it is a little more socially acceptable.

Other parents that were interviewed had similar feelings. As I reflect upon these statements and the statements of others my mind questions inclusion and mainstreaming. Most research is in favor of the mainstreaming or full inclusion of students with special needs. As I looked for articles discussing positive attributes towards self contained classrooms I was not able to find any. Most of the research found was how to successfully mainstream, how to train teachers and prepare them for mainstreaming and research backing up why mainstreaming is the best method. I understand that federal law mandates that children with special needs be put in the Least Restrictive Environment, but is this the best placement? The implications of these parents' stories leads me to this, question is mainstreaming best for the students?

Other topics that need further research include how does the use of labels help or hurt students and does the use of labels keep students out of gifted and talented



programs? As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter many of the parents wanted to refer to their child as having a learning difference not a learning disability. The use of labels exists for many reasons. A major reason is because of the various disability discrimination acts. Lauchlan and Boyle (2007) state the following as to why labels are needed in regards to disability acts, "It is expected that LEAs (local education agencies) respond positively to legislation, and it therefore follows that it is easier to respond to an identified condition than it is to an identification of particular difficulties without a label"(p. 41). They also list other reasons as to why labels might be considered helpful,

1. Diagnosis, or a label, leads to treatment: it opens doors for resources.
2. Labeling leads to awareness raising and promotes understanding of particular difficulties.
3. Labels reduce ambiguities and provide clear communication devices for professional exchanges of information.
4. Labels provide comfort to children and families by 'explaining' their difficulties.
5. Labels provide people with a social identity: a sense of belonging to a group.

(pp. 36-40)

On the flip side (Lauchlan and Boyle, 2007) there are also counter arguments to all of these points as to why labels might be considered harmful,

1. A label is applied but there is a lack of consideration regarding the nature of intervention.
2. Labeling leads to stigmatization.

3. Labels lead to generalization of children's difficulties, neglecting specific individualized issues.
4. Labeling leads to a focus on within-child deficits and possibly lowered expectations.
5. Labeling can lead to teasing, bullying, and low self-esteem. (pp. 36-40)

The latter five points would be worth researching. The research gathered from these points could possibly help in the areas of better partnership with parents and how parents are accepted. Because Mountain School was a private school they were not mandated by law to use labels. Instead they described the phenomena of each child's learning difference. The students did not have any limitations put upon them. They were taught how they learned and what tools they could use to overcome that learning difference. The parents I interviewed had very gifted children. Would these gifts eventually have been recognized in the public schools or would the label always overshadow the gifts that the students possessed? Many of these students might have belonged in the gifted and talented programs at their respective schools but could not dodge the label of their learning difference (Montgomery, 2003).

A similar study would also be beneficial in the other public or private school settings in which Schools Attuned has been implemented.

#### RECOMMENDATION FOR REPLICATION

Overall I feel that this study went relatively well. If I were to repeat it I would also interview the children of the parents. In just interviewing the parents I feel that some of the stories and experiences were one sided. I would like to hear first hand from the students themselves how Schools Attuned and Mountain School changed their lives. It

would be powerful to listen to the stories of how these students learn best and what tools they now know how to use to overcome their learning difference. I would also like to know from the students their thoughts about mainstreaming or are they the happiest around others who also have learning differences? It is my belief that this study will widely open doors for the parents of children who have learning differences. The study will hopefully create social change and stimulate the way educators think about parents who have children with learning disabilities and the children themselves.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Wednesday, September 18, 2007  
IRB Application No: ED0782  
Proposal Title: Schools Attuned - Outcomes at Home for Special Needs Students

Reviewed and Processed as: Expedited

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved Protocol Expires: 9/18/2008

Principal Investigator(s)

Jimieanne Kite P.O. Box 1420 Kingson, OK 73439	Grechen Schwarz 2444 Main Hall OSU Tulsa Tulsa, OK 741060700
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The IRB application referenced above has been approved. 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.

The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

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 protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Beth McTier in 210 Cordell North (phone: 405 744 5700, beth.mctier@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Sue C. Jacobs, Chair  
Institutional Review Board

## VITA

Jimieanne Julia Kite

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Dissertation: SCHOOLS ATTUNED – OUTCOMES IN THE HOME FOR SPECIAL  
NEEDS STUDENTS

Major Field: Curriculum Leadership

Biographical:

Personal Data: Jimieanne Julia Wilson, Born in Norman, Oklahoma on  
November 28, 1972, the daughter of Dr. N. Jim and Anna J. Wilson

Education: Graduated from Edmond High School, Edmond, Oklahoma in May,  
1991. Received Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary/Special  
Education from Oklahoma Christian University, Oklahoma City,  
Oklahoma, in May 1996; received Master of Education degree,  
Educational Administration from University of Oklahoma, Norman,  
Oklahoma, in July 1999; completed requirements for Doctor of  
Education degree at Oklahoma State University in 2009.

Experience: Oklahoma State University, Fall 2001, *Teaching GA*; Edmond  
Public Schools – Edmond Memorial High School, 2000-2001, *Assistant  
Principal*; Moore Public Schools – Moore Alternative Night School  
Program, 1999-2000, *Principal*; Moore Public Schools – Central Junior  
High, 1996-2000, *Special Education Teacher*; Moore Public Schools –  
Central Junior High, 1997-1999, *Athletic Director*

Professional Memberships: Phi Kappa Phi, Oklahoma State Graduate  
Association, Edmond Public Schools Reading Council, Oklahoma  
Association of Secondary School Principals, Cooperative Council for  
Oklahoma School Administration

Name: Jimieanne Julia Kite

Date of Degree: May, 2009

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: SCHOOLS ATTUNED – OUTCOMES IN THE HOME FOR SPECIAL  
NEEDS STUDENTS

Pages in Study: 200

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major Field: Curriculum Leadership

Scope and Method of Study: The purpose of this study was to research the question, what happens to families when they become engaged with the Schools Attuned program? The Schools Attuned program is a professional development program designed for educators. The study was qualitative; detailed interviewing, participant observation, and analyzing artifacts were the most common techniques used. The study was guided by critical theory and phenomenological inquiry. The interview participants (10 total) were all from a private school named Mountain School in North Texas. Mountain School is a school “designed especially for different learners.” After the interviews were completed each interview was transcribed and submitted to the participants for a member check. Then the data from the interviews was compiled into common themes, also know as thematic analysis. Chapters IV and V were constructed based upon the emergent themes taken from the analysis of the interviews.

Findings and Conclusions: The emergent themes from the study are as follows: Parents’ struggles before Schools Attuned (frustrations, guilt, exhaustion, exclusion, and social stigmas), Transformation as a result of Schools Attuned, and Schools Attuned driving the school culture. From these themes I discuss the following points in Chapter V: Building Parent Trust (the use of labels and providing partnership), Teacher Education (teacher reflection and teacher research, pre-service teachers) and Building a Climate of Victory. These applications mentioned could be linked to any building and used by administrators because human needs are universal. The recommendations would help build a sense of community and understanding for families that have children who have learning differences.

ADVISER’S APPROVAL: Dr. Gretchen Schwarz