

## Chapter 3

### Method

Despite an increase in literature on inclusive education, ethnographic research investigating general elementary education teachers' perspectives on inclusion is limited. Although previous studies have disclosed general educators' claims that they need training to be better prepared to teach in inclusive classrooms, few studies have revealed the ways that general educators who have taught in inclusive settings actually learned how to teach the students who were placed in their classrooms. The purpose of this study was to explore how general elementary educators have learned to teach students with and without disabilities in inclusive classrooms by investigating the following research question:

How have general elementary educators who are currently teaching in inclusive settings perceived that they learned to teach the wide heterogeneity of students in their classrooms?

Despite the multitude of survey designed research on teachers' perceptions of inclusion (Buell et al., 1999; Salend & Duhaney, 1999; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996) there is little representation of teachers' own voices in previous studies on inclusion. While survey tools have allowed accessibility to a large sample size, perceptions of participants had to be predetermined to develop and design survey questions, categories and rating scale systems previously selected by researchers (Stainback & Stainback, 1989). Thus, by design, quantitative surveys guided research findings because researchers had determined what questions were asked, how they were asked and how answers were scored. Qualitative methods, on the other hand, help to understand the perceptions,

perspectives and beliefs of participants by asking them to share personal stories and experiences. For this study, qualitative research methods were used to explore general educators' underrepresented perspectives that have not been previously solicited nor fully understood.

### Method and Procedure

Qualitative research methods were used to gather data throughout four months. During that time, semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data from participants. All semi-structured interviews were supplemented with participant observation in the participants' natural daily settings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

#### Participant Interviews

I used semi-structured and loosely structured interviews to obtain information from participants (Stainback & Stainback, 1989). During initial interviews, some specific, preplanned topics for questions were used. For example, some of the initial interview questions were formatted to obtain teachers' demographics. Information regarding the teacher preparation programs and awarded degrees, prior teaching experience, and type of service delivery model used for teaching in inclusive classrooms was collected early in the interview process. I used a five phase preplanned interview format with participants. Table 1 includes phases of data collection and examples of questions that were used during interview sessions. As interviews became well underway, I used more open-ended questions that allowed teachers' stories about teaching in inclusive classrooms to be told and understood. Questions that were asked during interviews were in part formulated in response to Salend's (1999) call to better understand teachers' experiences of inclusion. Questions solicited teachers': (a) beliefs and feelings about inclusion, (b) beliefs and

effects of the experiences of inclusion on themselves and their students, (c) ways of collaborating and communicating with others and (d) skills and training necessary to implement inclusion successfully (Salend, 1999). In addition, I asked teachers to explain what they had done and were doing to learn to teach in inclusive classrooms. During the time of questioning, I found it valuable to listen to and inquire further into participants' experiential stories and opinions of events in their inclusive classrooms. For example, when interviewing Mrs. Slagle in a second grade classroom, I began asking what she learned, "Can you tell me about your experiences teaching in an inclusive classroom?" and continuing with, "Can you provide more details to help me understand how that was for you?" Throughout all interviewing sessions, it was important for me to "allow those who were studied to speak for themselves" (Sherman & Webb, 1988, p. 3). Participants in this study were noted as an authority of their own lives and were encouraged to provide information within that context (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were scheduled either before school or during teachers' break times such as when students were at library or at lunch. Most interviews took place in the teachers' own classrooms. Exceptions to this occurred when some teachers' assistants or other support staff were in the teachers' own classrooms and, in that case, the participants themselves found available locations (unused classrooms or meeting rooms) in the building that provided a quiet, private environment for interviewing. In all instances, I made every effort to ensure that participants felt comfortable and at ease during interview sessions.

## Participant Observation

Participant observation began when I entered the participants' environments. "Spradley (1980) argued that there are three types of participant observations. They include: (a) descriptive observations; (b) focused observations; and (c) selective observations that are explicitly linked to researchers' questioning" (Burgess, 1984, p. 96). All three types of observations were utilized in this study.

I used descriptive observations to record detailed information on participants' characteristics, such as age, gender and race. Descriptive observations were also made of participants' settings. Details describing the actual sights, sounds and overall feel of their environment were important to document. Observations such as these were valuable because they helped to orient the data in a descriptively detailed context (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Burgess, 1984).

I used focused observations to find more specific details regarding participants and their environments. Attention focused on participants' interactions with others. Focused observations were also used to document important events that happened during data collection times. For example, there were a few instances when I was being a participant observer in a classroom when participants, teaching assistants, and special education teachers were discussing events that happened in the classroom. I specifically focused my attention on these interactions to better understand the relationship that these professionals had with each other.

Selective observations were used after I was familiar with participants and data collection sites. During qualitative studies, it becomes possible to learn about particular interactions that had been scheduled (a meeting, for example) and carefully select

observation sessions during these events for data collection. In this sense, it was important for me to be selective with some observations that were scheduled to maximize the data collection time. There were two instances when I learned about preplanned meetings for teachers to discuss classroom events with assistants who worked alongside them in their classrooms. I asked if I could attend these meetings; both teachers agreed. I visited the meetings as a silent observer and documented what I witnessed after the meetings had ended.

Since participant observation was used, I wrote fieldnotes to document events that I had witnessed. Note taking, record keeping and creating data collection files were important components of this qualitative research study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Jorgensen, 1989).

Once I had gained access into the classrooms, I worked to create a welcoming and friendly atmosphere between the participants and myself. I was sensitive to participants possibly seeing me in an "expert" role as I might have been perceived because of my affiliation with a university setting. Instead, I mentioned that I, too, had been an inclusive elementary teacher, wanted to learn from their experiences and tried to develop a relationship similar to that of a learner. I developed a friendly relationship with all participants as well as some staff members who worked within the school settings. For example, I often talked with secretaries, classroom assistants, parents of students, and other teachers who weren't participating in this study. Occasionally, I engaged in some short conversations with students in hallways; however, those conversations were brief and situational. Specifically, I asked students what task they were completing and how their day was going. In the classroom setting, I always sat near the back or along the side

of the classrooms, physically distant from the students. Still, there were times that students entered the classrooms and initiated one on one conversations with me. During that time, students asked what I was doing and I told them that I was learning from their teachers. Although I am certain that students were aware of my presence in the classroom, they often acted as though I went unnoticed by them. I spent approximately 30 minutes in classrooms during times that I observed teachers in their settings.

### Participants and Settings

Since the design of this study used a small sample size, it is important to understand who the participants were and what their settings were while I collected the data. It is also important to understand the service delivery model that teachers used to teach in their classrooms. Precisely, service delivery models define who teaches and assists students in inclusive classrooms and where students are instructed (Webber, 1997). Although all classrooms were located within the same school district, service delivery models significantly differed from school to school. In addition, it is valuable to understand the population of students within each participant's classroom. This information is useful for situating and better understanding participants' perspectives on teaching in inclusive classrooms.

The participants of this study were ten general elementary educators who were certified to teach and are currently teaching elementary education in New York State. Teachers were selected through a three-step process. Initially, I interviewed an inclusive elementary education field placement coordinator of a private, research-based University to identify schools that were known to successfully include students with disabilities in general elementary education classrooms. The university where the field placement

coordinator works prepares undergraduates to teach in inclusive elementary classrooms and places their preservice students in local schools that teach students with and without disabilities together. Since the intention of this study was to understand the learning experiences of elementary education teachers in inclusive classrooms, it was important to determine which particular inclusive classrooms would be studied. Although many schools claim to be inclusive in design and practice, little is often known of their actual teaching practices (Smith & Smith, 2000). Therefore, I determined that it would be beneficial to have a professional staff member of a university known as having a strong inclusive elementary preparation program to provide a listing of local, public elementary schools that she considered to be successful including students with disabilities in their classrooms. Inclusive education, although not new in theory, has not often been implemented and sustained successfully in public school settings (Guetzloe, 1999). The goal was to find teacher informants who believed that they were successful with inclusive practices. As such, it made sense to interview teachers who worked in schools who were perceived by the university student teacher placement coordinator, as those who she believed were successful at inclusive education.

When meeting with the coordinator, I asked her if she could provide a list of schools that she believed were effective with their inclusive education practices. During the time that I talked with the placement coordinator, she provided five schools that she believed to successfully use inclusive education practices. Three of the five schools were located in the same school district. Therefore, I narrowed my focus to these three schools to keep the context of data collection within one site. Next, I contacted the principals of the three elementary schools and asked them to provide the study's contact information to

teachers in their schools who were teaching in inclusive classrooms. Each of the principals (two men and one woman) was very welcoming and willing to provide information to their teachers. I hand delivered information regarding this study to the three principals so it could be distributed to teachers (See Appendix B for Letter of Invitation to Participants). From that initial solicitation, ten teachers made a contact with me volunteering to participate in the study. Once teachers contacted me, they were individually interviewed to determine if they met the criteria that were established for participating in this study. The criteria were that: (a) the teachers must define their classrooms that they are teaching in as inclusive with at least one student having a disability other than a speech or language delay and (b) teachers must only possess a general elementary education degree with no degree, certification or teaching license in special or inclusive education. Each of the ten teachers met the criteria that had been established for participating in the study. At that time I then planned dates and times for additional interview sessions.

Data collection settings are viewed as valuable components to researchers using qualitative research methods. Researchers utilizing participant observation believe that "events cannot be understood adequately if isolated from their contexts" (Sherman & Webb, 1988, p. 5). This study's data collection sites were the teachers' own classrooms and schools in the central New York area. I scheduled participant observation sessions to follow the 45-minute interviews. Therefore, all interviews and observations took place in the participants' environments. Precise timing of the interviews and observations were dependent on teachers' schedules, availability and their willingness to meet with me.



The ten classrooms where I collected data were all located within three different elementary schools residing in the same school district. The schools were all in close proximity to each other, not more than five miles distance between them.

Demographically, the district had a total enrollment of 5,000 students. Racially, 96% of the student body was Caucasian and 14% of the students participated in receive free or reduced lunch programs. The student to teacher ratio was 16:1. Of their pupil enrollment, 9% were served through their special education program, as reported and identified on a state statistical profile. The average class size was 23. Eighty-two percent of the students spent less than 20% of their school day in settings separate from general education classrooms. None of the students were educated in segregated special education settings for their entire school day.

The school district did not have a written mission statement or philosophy pertaining to inclusive education. However, through interview sessions, I was able to gain some insight into how the school district's elementary classrooms transitioned from non-inclusive to inclusive settings. Lucielle Slagle stated,

"About eight years ago, students with disabilities came back to our district. They [administration] made my building [Malden Park] the inclusive building in the district. So every kid in the district, who was of that level of need, came to our building. So we had tons of teachers and tons of students with special needs and tons of TAs [teaching assistants] and then about four years ago, they [administration] sent everybody [students with disabilities] to their home school. And at that time, our numbers of students with special needs went down and everyone else's went up. So, every single kindergartner went to their home

schools and they sent all of the other grade level students back. Now, all of the buildings are K-5 inclusive."

Teachers stated that they did not have formal meetings with administrators regarding this programmatic shift in their school district. Instead, second grade teacher Mary Kay stated, "Basically, the word got out that children would be returned to their home school and there would be inclusion in the classrooms. Nothing else was said. You are never forced to take inclusion. They [administration] always ask for a volunteer.... But you never really know what you are getting yourself in for."

Lucielle Slagle, another second grade teacher provided insight into how the teaching has changed as students with disabilities began to be educated in her inclusive classroom. She stated,

"The first year when inclusion was just emerging here, it was more of a self contained program. We started by teaching students with special needs in the back of regular classrooms. We started by doing some parallel teaching.... The special ed. teacher would do a parallel activity in the back of the room with homogeneous groups. Not all day. Then we started to use cooperative learning and we did all kinds of things. And then I tried to have students fully included and we modified their curriculum slightly and then we figured out that there isn't really one teaching model that could fit every student or with every group of students."

Many district elementary classrooms began to include students with disabilities without any written procedure, policy or belief statement regarding how students were to be instructed or how general educators were to be prepared for such teaching assignments.

The three different elementary schools were similar in all demographic characteristics. There were approximately 400 students at each school, kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup>-grade. Something interesting to note, however, was the difference in the "feel" or overall culture of each of the three elementary schools. The following descriptions provide some insight into what I observed while conducting this study in each school. After the description of each school, the teachers who taught and were interviewed at each setting are also described in detail. Through interview sessions, I found that each of the teachers who were studied came with a variety of backgrounds and experiences prior to teaching in inclusive classroom settings. Knowing some of their own history has helped to situate their experiences, insights and opinions expressed during this study regarding teaching in inclusive classrooms (Descriptions of participants are summarized in Table 2).

### Applecross Elementary School

Applecross Elementary School looked large in appearance. However, the building actually housed two elementary schools, both currently in operation. My data collection took place in one of the two schools. The school was set in a residential area with neighborhood houses surrounding the school grounds.

Upon entering the building for each interview, the secretary asked me to "take a seat". Afterward, she "buzzed" the teacher who I was scheduled to interview and afterward said, "You can go down". There was never any additional conversation between the secretary and me; her paper work seemed to consume her attention. Occasionally, I was able to observe times when students or teachers entered the office. The interactions between everyone who entered the office seemed to mirror my own

experiences; the secretary attended to the task needing attention and then quickly went back to her own work. Two participants of the study worked at Applecross Elementary School.

The walls had some student work displayed, however, most of the wall space was occupied by green student lockers. Along the edge of the hallways were students' winter boots lined between classroom doorways. Classroom doors were opened and teachers' statements were clearly heard and distinguished over students' voices. Two of the participants of the study worked at Applecross Elementary School. The following information describes both teachers who shared information with me at Applecross.

#### Ms. Betty Kay - Second Grade

Ms. Kay was a European American woman who appeared to be in her early fifties. She had short black curly hair and was a tall, full figured woman. Her voice was deep and her laughter was hearty and frequent. Initial responses to interview questions were often short and highlighted with phrases such as "To do this job, you really have to like kids" and "That's just how things go". Mrs. Kay began her career teaching Kindergarten in a parochial school in West Virginia in 1973. Discussing her time there, Mrs. Kay mentioned, "They had just opened up Kindergarten then, that was the first year for that, the first year for me being there and they didn't know what to do with me and I basically didn't know what to do with them. So, we kind of fiddled and diddled our whole way through." Originally from Pennsylvania, Mrs. Kay moved back there shortly after her career began and taught in a public school first grade classroom. One year afterward, despite not having training or a degree in special education, Mrs. Kay then began to work in an infant toddler program designed for children with disabilities ages birth through

three years old. Mrs. Kay described some of her experiences working with young children by explaining, "I had to go to students' homes, to talk to the parents, and give them activities to do with the kids; we were the parents' support". After working in the infant toddler program for five years, she took some time off to have her own three children. Afterward, Mrs. Kay taught nursery school for five years and then moved to New York State and began substituting regularly in the school district where she currently works. In 1993, she was hired as a full time Kindergarten teacher. Mrs. Kay was in her first year teaching in an inclusive classroom when I interviewed her. She was working with a service delivery model that included a special education teacher working with her for half of a day (mornings) and two special education teaching assistants who spent the second half of a day (afternoons) in the classroom with her. When asked where students were instructed, Mrs. Kay stated that "The kids are always in this classroom, they're always here. They hang their hat in this room and they take it when they leave." Mrs. Kay had a classroom of 19 students with four identified as having disabilities. Of the students with disabilities, one student had Down syndrome; one had autism, one had Pervasive Developmental Disorder and one had severe emotional imbalances. Each of these students had his/her own Individualized Education Program. Mrs. Kay also worked with other professionals who periodically came into her classroom to work with students in her class. They included the speech, occupational and physical therapists.

#### Mrs. Marie Mahar - First Grade

Mrs. Mahar began her professional career with a degree in political science and psychology and took a number of educational electives throughout her undergraduate program. After completing her undergraduate degree, Mrs. Mahar applied to law school

and was accepted. However, she got married and began a master's degree in elementary education instead. After obtaining her degree, she taught in a parochial school for seven years while working for two different educational publishing companies and working as a New York State elementary math mentor. Following that time, Mrs. Mahar began teaching at the school district where she now resides and has been there for five years. In total, Mrs. Mahar has taught one year in second grade, two years in all day kindergarten and nine years in first grade classrooms. Although Ms. Mahar mentioned teaching students with learning disabilities and cerebral palsy in the past, she stated that this was the first year that she worked in a classroom that the district defined as an inclusive classroom. Ms. Mahar had a special education teacher work in her classroom for half of the day and an all day teaching assistant who was assigned to work one on one with a student. Ms. Mahar also had an additional half day teaching assistant (afternoons) that entered the classroom when the special education teacher's schedule had her placed in another classroom in the school. Three students were educated in Ms. Mahar's classroom with an Individualized Education Plan. Students with aspergers' syndrome, Down syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder were in her classroom. In total, Ms. Mahar had eighteen students in her classroom.

#### Malden Park Elementary School

Five of the participants of the study worked at Malden Park Elementary School. The school was located on a busy street within a residential neighborhood. Upon entering the building, I noticed a lounge area with upholstered furniture alongside a round table where students were sitting with an adult, apparently working in a small group setting completing an academic task while quietly talking together. Children's colorful artwork

adorned the walls and was propped up inside a display showcase. Hanging plants and large floor plants edged the hallways. A large sign read, "Welcome to our Community". When I followed the signs to the main office, I was greeted with a tall and wide sliding window that allowed me to see the secretary's desk and inside the office. Each time I visited the school, a woman approached me from behind the window and asked whom I was there to visit. I quickly grew accustomed to their visitor sign in policy and waited in the hallway for the secretary to notify the teacher that I had arrived for our scheduled meeting.

Something interesting and worthy of note happened during each visit that I had at Malden Park School. Every time I entered the school, a teacher, student, classroom assistant, principal or parent of a student always greeted me. Each person asked about my visit to their school and greeted me in a friendly manner. All interactions went well beyond the simple small talk frequently associated between unfamiliar visitors and school staff. For example, I engaged in a fifteen-minute conversation with a teaching assistant regarding her teenaged son and his interest in ice hockey. I also talked with a parent-volunteer regarding her three girls who had attended Malden Park School and the involvement that she had as a parent volunteer. A friendly, welcoming environment was evident throughout the building. The following descriptions provides insight into the five teachers who were interviewed at Malden Park School.

#### Ms. Lucielle Slagle - Second grade

Ms. Slagle was a European American who appeared to be in her early thirties. She had long wavy hair, olive colored skin, deep eyes, smiled often and ended many of her statements by adding, "You know what I mean?" She was a first generation American;

her family came to the United States from Italy prior to her birth. She was short in stature, not much above five feet tall. Ms. Slagle received a teaching degree in 1994 and began her career as a preschool teacher. After one summer, she began teaching at the school where she currently works. She taught third and fourth grades for four years and then took a maternity leave to have a child, came back and began teaching in inclusive classrooms. Ms. Slagle was currently in her third year teaching in a second grade classroom when I interviewed her. She explained, "I wanted the inclusive classroom. I adore all of the kids. I love team teaching and I could never teach alone again, so that's really good." Ms. Slagle's service delivery model included a special education teacher in the mornings, alongside a one on one teaching assistant who was assigned to work with a specific student and another all day teaching assistant to help with whatever was needed. Ms. Slagle also explained that she works with an early literacy teaching assistant in the mornings as well. Ms. Slagle commented "So, there's three extra adults plus myself; that's four, plus I have an early literacy assistant that works with me every morning which is five, plus I often have a student teacher so that makes six.... I feel very, very lucky". In her inclusive classroom of 17 students, five students had IEPs. One student had Aspergers' syndrome, one student had a sensory disorder and learning disability, one had a learning disability in reading and writing, one had a speech and language delay and one had "significant disabilities in reading, writing and math". All students spend their day in the general education classroom for their instruction.

#### Mrs. Kathy Tallman - Fifth grade

Mrs. Tallman was a European American in her early thirties. She was tall, thin and had long dark brown hair that rested easily behind her shoulders. Each time we met,



she greeted me with a cheerful smile. Mrs. Tallman received a history and elementary education undergraduate degree from a state university in 1997. Although not formally taught about inclusion in college courses, Mrs. Tallman was placed in two inclusive classrooms while completing her student teaching experience. Her placements were in first and fourth grade settings. She described her experience as, "I had a really exciting experience there [fourth grade] because I was able to see a lot of diverse students and see how inclusion works, not even being graduated from school yet." Following her student teaching experience, Mrs. Tallman obtained a job at her current school teaching in a fifth grade inclusive classroom. She was in her fourth year as a teacher and while completing her master's degree in reading at the time of this study. During all four years as a teacher, Mrs. Tallman has worked in inclusive classrooms.

Mrs. Tallman had a teaching assistant who worked in her classroom half of the day (mornings) and a special education teacher who was in her classroom about 80% of the day. Mrs. Tallman explained that of the 80% of the day, the special education teacher "is in and out, in and out of my classroom throughout the morning so it is very trying on me." Mrs. Tallman had 20 students in her class; all students stay in her general education classroom for instruction time. Mrs. Tallman had four students who were working with individualized education plans, one student had a central auditory processing disorder and two students were identified as being "severely disabled in reading and math". During interview sessions, Mrs. Tallman spoke about the class while also highlighting experiences she had within the last four years teaching in inclusive classrooms. When answering questions, her responses were often lengthy and detailed. Her eye contact was often fixed on the tape recorder that sat on the table between us and she often tucked her

long hair behind her ears and leaned toward it as if to get all of her information documented accurately.

### Mrs. Molly Chapman - Third grade

Soon into our interview sessions, Mrs. Chapman described herself as a student by explaining how difficult elementary school was for her when she was a child. She told about times that she needed to leave her own classroom to get resource help and always felt that she needed to do so much to catch up with the rest of her class. Mrs. Chapman explained that those experiences are some of the reasons that she is a firm believer in inclusive practices.

Mrs. Chapman was a European American who was in her mid thirties with two young children of her own. Initially, Mrs. Chapman went to a small private college for a business degree and finished that in 1995. After her youngest son was born, she went back to school and completed a master's degree in elementary education within one year. She has taught fourth grade for a year and a half, then two years of second grade and was in her second year teaching third grade during the time of this study. Mrs. Chapman had been teaching for a total of 5 years. All of her teaching experience had been within the one school that she was teaching at during the time of the study. Mrs. Chapman had a special education teacher who worked with her half of the day (mornings) and two teaching assistants. One teaching assistant was in her classroom in the afternoons and another teaching assistant worked one on one with a student throughout the school day. There were seventeen students in her classroom, three that had individualized education plans. Two students had autism, one student had a central auditory processing delay and three students were identified as having speech and language delays.

### Miss Michelle McGlaughlin - Fourth grade

Miss McGlaughlin, who was part Hispanic, used to teach Spanish in a large city in the western part of the United States. Miss McGlaughlin had six years teaching experience. She taught for four years in another public school and was in her second year at the school where she currently taught during the study. Miss McGlaughlin was a single woman in her mid to late thirties. She wore her curly, dark blonde hair pulled back in a loose ponytail. Her scattered freckles and easy smile cheerfully welcomed me during interview sessions during each classroom visit. During the time of our interviewing, she was training to run a marathon and spoke of her efforts often. She was sponsoring a little girl diagnosed with leukemia and was raising money in her honor. Throughout all interviews, she seemed energetic and maintained a positive attitude. She stated "I believe that attitude is everything. Attitude is everything in learning".

Miss McGlaughlin had three students in her class working with individualized education plans. One student had autism and was legally blind, one was learning disabled in reading and writing and one student was an English Language Learner. Miss McGlaughlin stated, "I have a student from Guatemala and she had not a lick of English when she first came in. We're catching her up very slowly. She hasn't been in school before...and she's eleven... and had no formalized education whatsoever". Miss McGlaughlin had an aide that came in her classroom for half of a day (mornings), a one hour special education aide was scheduled to enter the classroom following the time that the first aide left and then a third aide was scheduled to enter the classroom for another hour of the day. In addition, Miss McGlaughlin had two different special education teachers that worked with her in the classroom. Both special education teachers alternate

between times that they are in the classroom in order to accommodate other students' schedules throughout the school. Miss McGlaughlin explained, "Special education teachers are all over the board regarding what time they actually come in [the classroom] because they fit my kids in after everybody else's... it's a juggling act. Every day is different. But it works out in the end. The kids are very accommodating. We're all inclusive.... The students are always in the classroom".

#### Mrs. Hollie Peterson - First grade

Mrs. Hollie Peterson was a European American who completed a bachelor's degree in elementary education from a large private university and completed a master's degree in elementary education from a state university. Mrs. Peterson taught in a parochial elementary school for two years and then resigned for a 6<sup>th</sup> grade position at a public middle school. The following year, she took a second grade position as a permanent substitute teacher in a second grade class. She has worked in an inclusive classroom for eight years and has taught elementary school for fifteen years. Mrs. Peterson was not much above five feet tall. She was in her late thirties and had two children of her own who also attend the school where she teaches. Mrs. Peterson is currently teaching in a first grade classroom with 22 students. Four students were educated in her class that worked with individual education plans; one student had Down syndrome, one student had autism, one student had a hearing impairment and one student had a speech and language delay. Mrs. Peterson worked with a special education teacher in the morning, a one on one assistant for her student with Down syndrome and a special education teaching assistant who worked in the classroom with students in the afternoon.

Mrs. Peterson mentioned that students with IEPs "are in the classroom about 95% of the day".

### Silvermann Elementary School

Three of the participants worked at Silvermann Elementary School. The school was located just outside of a residential neighborhood, on a hilly, busy road not accessible to pedestrians. There was a large parking lot situated in the front of the school. Trees, shrubs and a well-maintained landscape surrounded the school. Upon entering, a large sign stretched across a closed-door hallway that read, "Welcome visitors. Please sign in at the main office". The office was large with a counter nearly four and a half feet tall that made it difficult to see both secretaries that worked behind it. Each time I entered, it seemed that the secretaries were quietly talking together about personal matters with familiarity and laughter within their conversations. When staff members entered the office, secretaries were quick to engage them in their ongoing small talk. Although I am certain that my presence was apparent, they each acted as though I had been unnoticed. On two occasions, the principal came out of his office, talked with me about my own schoolwork and asked about my graduation date. As the principal entered their workspace, the secretaries quickly stopped their conversation and began completing their deskwork. After I answered his questions, he left the office, and the secretaries resumed their conversation. Although the secretaries frequently saw me and addressed me by name, their side conversations continued behind the tall counter that separated us while I waited silently for my scheduled interview session. The following descriptions are of the three teachers who were interviewed at Silvermann Elementary.

### Mrs. Cameron Hamad - Fourth grade

Mrs. Hamad was currently in her second year teaching elementary education. She completed her undergraduate degree from a state university and was currently completing her master's degree in reading. Prior to this year, Mrs. Hamad taught fourth grade in a parochial school and is now teaching in a public school at the same grade level. Mrs. Hamad was a European American, had short brown hair, was tall and thin and appeared nervous while being interviewed. As time passed, her nervousness subsided a bit but it remained noticeable throughout all sessions. Mrs. Hamad often claimed that she needed to "vent" a lot and credited her husband for listening to her in the evenings of days that she found difficult. She does not have any children of her own.

Mrs. Hamad had 19 students in her inclusive classroom. Four students in her class were working with individualized education plans. One student had Down syndrome, one had a central auditory processing delay, and two identical twin boys had "significant developmental delays", a result of their birth mother's crack cocaine drug use and addiction prior to their birth. Mrs. Hamad had three teaching assistants, one who spent time in the classroom throughout the whole day and two who worked with students in the afternoon. A special education teacher also spent some morning time in the classroom but Mrs. Hamad explained, "Mostly it is just me and an assistant in here in the mornings". Students in Mrs. Hamad's classroom often spent the mornings in her general education classroom and were educated in more separate settings in the afternoons.

### Mrs. Pat Micklus - Third grade

Mrs. Micklus graduated from college in 1980 and began teaching in a parochial school in a combination first and second grade classroom. After two years, Mrs. Micklus

got married and spent the following ten years moving every few years to different states because of her husband's job situation. Each time, Mrs. Micklus obtained teaching jobs in second through fourth grade in parochial schools. In 1991, Mrs. Micklus left her teaching job to stay at home and raise her three children. After seven years, Mrs. Micklus was hired as a teaching assistant for an inclusive fourth grade classroom in a public school setting. The following year, Mrs. Micklus took a position as a permanent substitute teacher in the same public school that was where she was teaching during the time of the study.

Mrs. Micklus was in her second year of teaching third grade; it was her first year teaching in an inclusive classroom. There were twenty students in her class. Of the twenty, three students had Individualized Education Plans. Two students had been diagnosed with autism and one student had Asperger's syndrome. Mrs. Micklus had a teaching assistant in her classroom all day along with a special education teacher who worked to teach some students math and reading in her classroom. At times, some of the students with IEPs left her classroom to get more individualized help from the special education teacher. Mrs. Micklus mentioned that although daily schedules vary, students who were working with IEPs spent "about 50% of the time in the classroom" with the rest of their time spent in resource room settings.

#### Ms. Lynn Kelso - Third grade

Ms. Kelso was in her twentieth year teaching elementary school. She received her bachelor's degree from a state university in elementary education and received a master's degree from a large private university in elementary education. During Ms. Kelso's first years of teaching, she taught in an inner city elementary school where "there was a

diverse population". She taught there for 13 years. During the last four or five years of her experience at that school, she began teaching in an inclusive classroom. Ms. Kelso explained, "I was part of an inclusion program where they had all types of children with disabilities, both physical and academic and a large population of children with autism". When talking with Ms. Kelso, her many years' experience working with students was evident. She spoke in a professional manner as we sat alongside each other at a small table. During my first interview session, Ms. Kelso mentioned that the table that we sat at doubled as her own desk. She explained that she had no need for a desk that took the space of a table for meeting with children so she had it replaced with a table instead. Ms. Kelso mentioned that she was currently finishing an advanced degree in preparation of becoming an elementary school principal. She had two children of her own. Of the participants in the study, Ms. Kelso had the most experience teaching in inclusive classrooms.

Ms. Kelso had 21 students in her classroom. Two students were working with an Individualized Education Plan; one student had Down syndrome and another student had a speech and language delay. Ms. Kelso worked with a half-day special education teacher in the mornings and a full time teaching assistant throughout the school day. All students spend the entire day being educated in the general education classroom.

#### Data Collection Procedures

Data collection took place during a continuous, four-month duration of the second semester of the school year. The data collection time proved to be a valuable component to the study's design because some of the teachers who participated in the study were in their first year teaching in inclusive settings. Therefore, collecting data during the second



semester allowed teachers to gain insight into their new setting and comment on it as they were learning along the way.

Since qualitative methods were used in this study, my data collection procedures need to be understood to determine how data were handled.

### Analyzing Gathered Data

I began analyzing gathered data soon after the data collection began. During analysis, data were evaluated to find common topics that created patterns. A coding system was used to categorize the common topics and patterns within the data and to interpret the meanings and relationships disclosed from the participants' interpretations (Sherman & Webb, 1988). After codes were established, coding terms and phrases were sorted and categorized into generalized overarching themes. I used the themes to provide meaning to the data that was gathered.

After all four themes had been developed and analyzed, a cross-analysis between teachers within each theme was conducted to discover common characteristics particular to groups of teachers who were located within or missing from each theme.

In qualitative research, there are many ways that data, coding systems and themes can be analyzed to create meaning. In this study, it was important to realize the implications of interpreted data. When data were collected from participants' environments and interview sessions, interpretations were made regarding what had been said and how participants understood their daily happenings. Throughout this study, it was valuable to recognize that the participants had interpretations of their own experiences and surroundings (Blumer, 1969). This form of interpretation has been referred to as symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Duneier, 1999). Symbolic

interactionism "is the assumption that human experience is mediated by interpretation" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 25). Participant interpretations included the meanings that were given to interactions, events, circumstances, situations, environments, others and themselves. Therefore, "multiple realities" were considered during data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 25). It became beneficial to take every effort to dismantle my own interpretations of data and events by asking participants for their own accounts regarding situations that were observed.

As a qualitative researcher, I assumed the role of an interpreter when engaged in the data collection and analysis. In my role as a researcher, I needed to recognize my own interpretations of data and subjects' interpretations of all circumstances and events. Understanding that I took on a role as an interpreter is grounded in a postmodernist belief. "Postmodernists argue that you can only know something from a certain position" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 20). The position that I interpreted the data from is that of a Caucasian, middle class female who had taught in inclusive elementary classrooms for ten years.

As a researcher and teacher living in a mid-sized city, I had some limited background knowledge of the school district where I collected data. I knew where the school district was located and was aware of some of the elementary schools' names and locations. I did not have any relationship to any of the teachers or students who were affiliated with the school district in any way.

Since I used the University's field placement coordinator to identify schools that were known to be successful with inclusion practices, I knew that the some of the

teachers had some affiliation with the University and with educating preservice teachers. I did not have any other information on the data collection sites.

### Validation

I utilized three steps to validate the accuracy of data collection and analysis. First, I audiotaped and transcribed all interviews verbatim. With this tool, data were accurately recorded, typed out, viewed and studied for analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Second, participant observation sessions immediately followed interviews so I could better understand and situate participants' comments within their daily contexts. This strategy helped to avoid false interpretations of participants' comments generated during interview sessions because comments were better understood when placed into the context of participants' environments. Third and perhaps most importantly, I provided participants with an opportunity to review the themes that emerged to validate the findings of this study. Using this "member check" strategy helped to ensure that the findings were congruent with participants' perceptions, beliefs and opinions (Salisbury et al., 1993). The member check system was used during the fourth and final interview session that I had with participants. During that time, I described themes that I found to have emerged in this study and used specific information that participants provided during interview sessions to further explain the themes. In all instances, teachers agreed with the themes that were generated from interview data. In a few situations, teachers took time to provide additional information to further describe their experiences that I highlighted during our conversation.

The following chapter describes the themes that emerged from the data in this study. In particular, the themes define how general elementary educators acquired knowledge on how to teach in inclusive classrooms.