

Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education

Volume 2
Number 2 *Electronic Journal for Inclusive
Education Vol. 2, No. 2 (Summer/Fall 2007)*

Article 3

Summer 2007

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Moss, G., & Leatherman, J. (2007). "Plug-In" - What is in a Name? Including Children with Disabilities in the World of Educational Quality, *Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education*, 2 (2).

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"Plug-In" – What is in a Name?

Including Children with Disabilities in the World of Educational Quality

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Abstract

This narrative research study examined aspects of an inclusive program for students with mild disabilities. The overall goal of the research was to evaluate the effectiveness of the inclusion program for an elementary school in a rural Midwest neighborhood while using the ongoing inquiry process to design and conduct professional development. This specific paper explores participants understanding of the history of inclusion in their school and the definitions of inclusion as presented through the practitioners' words as they reflect about the "Plug-in" program. The multiple definitions provided in individual interviews of participants of "Plug-in" exhibited the complexities of the evaluation of the inclusion model in a school.

Plug-In" – What is in a Name?

Including Children with Disabilities in the World of Educational Quality

Several trends in education point to the overall focus on educating for democracy in a diverse, multicultural society (Darling-Hammond, 1996). This project is supported by the vision of the graduate education program of the School of Education (SOE) in a mid-size, comprehensive, urban university in the Midwest. The SOE is committed to translating the scholar-practitioner leadership model into the practice of developing multicultural learning communities through meaningful university-school partnerships. In this collaborative project, university researchers engaged participants from Turtleland Elementary School (pseudonym), situated in a nearby rural community, as scholar-practitioners to

evaluate their use of “Plug-In” as an Inclusion Model and inquire into how it fits in the broader educational arena.

This research project was designed to collect data on the “Plug-In” program as a way for participants to evaluate the program’s effectiveness, make program decisions and to grow professionally. From the outset, when the researchers were corrected for referring to the program as a “push-in” program, they realized the importance of the descriptive term “plug-in” in the program under study. As the teachers began to define the concept of “plug-in” as it was being used in their school, the authors began to search the literature for the term. It did not take long to realize there was a total void in the literature concerning the term “plug-in” as an inclusion model, yet the term defined the concept of the inclusion program under study. The presence of multiple definitions of “plug-in” emerged in the analysis of the narrative and observation data from the first year of implementation. It is this discovery of multiple definitions and understanding of history that is addressed in this look at evaluation.

Contextualizing the Narrative Analysis in Scholarly Partnerships

The collaborative nature of this project is multi-dimensional as it draws on the scholar-practitioner educational leadership ideal (Horn, 2000; Jenlink, 2001), university and public school links and teacher research theory (Burnaford, Fischer, Hobson, 1996; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999; Cole & Knowles; 2000; MacLean & Mohr, 1999; Mohr, Rogers, Sanford, Nocerino, MacLean, & Clawson, 2004; Thomas, 2005). Specifically, this research study is structured by the ideal of scholar-practitioner teacher leadership (Moss, 2004a) and scholarly partnerships as envisioned by the School of Education where the researchers prepare P-12 general education and special education teachers.

The ideal of scholar-practitioner leadership emphasizes preparing educational leadership that addresses the challenges of the 21st Century. Moss (in press) has identified critical ethnography, a post-formal lens, and narrative inquiry as critical pedagogy for improving teaching by setting aside time and space for teachers directly impacted by a program, such as the inclusion program under study, to reflect

on their understanding of the origins of the program, context of implementation, processes and patterns that are developing (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993), and tell their personal professional stories of experience as a way to unravel political and contradictory aspects as tension for constructive growth and development. Imperative is the inclusion of all members directly affected by the educational program designed to improve teaching and learning among teachers and students.

While there is sufficient literature that depicts how university professors work with public school personnel on various curricular and other school issues (Beeler, Hayes, Lewis, Russell & Moss, 2004; Rickey & Moss, 2004; Soohoo, 1993; Soohoo & Brown, 1994), there has been a lack of concerted effort by universities and districts to partner in constructivist knowledge-making over educational issues present in daily practice in P-16 classrooms. This inclusion project created space for open dialogue between university teacher educators and elementary school educators (special education teachers, instructional assistants, general education teachers, principal, assistant principal, counselor, special education coordinator, special education director) concerning implementation of a "Plug-In" program to achieve successful inclusion practices. Of particular interest in this study were what appeared to be political dynamics or tensions between the university and Turtleland scholar-practitioners as the traditional perspectives of role separation of researcher and subjects were blurred and a learning community developed as evidenced in the contribution of knowledge for translating inclusion theory and legislation into practice.

Contextualizing Inclusion Practices in the Literature and Seeing the Void

This inclusion project as action research is also influenced by the pragmatics of implementing laws, such as the IDEA and NCLB. IDEA was intended to ensure students are educated in the least restricted environment and has been actualized by co-teaching (general education teacher and special education teacher) practices with all students in an inclusive classroom setting. Inclusion of students with mild disabilities in the regular classroom continues to grow into many forms and shapes. Cluster

inclusion places students with disabilities in a few select classrooms at grade level, with the general and special education teacher team teaching in those classrooms. Baglieri and Knoph (2004) argued for the construction of “differences as natural, acceptable, and ordinary” (p. 525). According to Mallory and New (1994) children with disabilities have a valid right to be involved in the classroom community. All children desire to be contributing members of the community and it is in the public interest to have children with disabilities in the community at large.

Inclusion allows for diversity and equity to co-exist in the classroom. This equitable classroom environment is derived from a social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978) of how our knowledge is shaped through the social influences and interactions within our environment. Davydov (1995) presents ideas of Vygotsky as they relate to the inclusive classroom. These ideas can be applied to the professional development of teachers as they socially construct their knowledge and understanding of the environment that is acceptable to all children. These 3 ideas (1) teaching/learning is used to develop personalities (students and teachers), (2) teaching/learning assumes an active role in ones own development, and (3) teaching/learning is collaboration among teachers and between teachers and students to provide for the individual needs of students with disabilities. Skirtic and Sailor (1996) suggest that inclusion is much more than a special education service delivery model it is a new cultural perspective that corresponds to the emerging and changing social aspects of our environment. A recent case study (Matropieri, Sruggs, Graetz, Norland, Gardizi, & McDuffie, 2005) supports the preliminary findings of this research that reveal the complexity of implementing critical education programs based on democratic ideals that promote equity applied specifically for this project of inclusion. The term “plug-in,” which is used to identify the inclusion under study, was not found in the literature.

Contextualizing the Study in Post-formal Inquiry and Narrative Methodology

Based on scholar-practitioner leadership theory, the researchers employed critical ethnography (Anderson, 1989, 1998, 1999; Lather, 1986, 1992; Quantz, 1992) with an analytical lens shaped by the

teachers responses to questions organized by four elements of post-formal inquiry—origins, context, processes, and patterns (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993). Key was authentic participation of the teachers directly participating in the inclusion model (Anderson, 1998). This authentic participation was achieved through narrative methods, critical story telling (Barone, 1992), and critical incidents (Tripp, 1993). The narrative inquiry work of Clandinin and Connelly (1988, 1991, 1994, 1996), Connelly and Clandinin (1990, 1999), Barone (1992), and Polkinghorne (1995) further framed this research study as a way to maintain a commitment to inclusion in the research process. Drawing on Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative configurations in inquiry, the teachers' narratives were analyzed for insights into the teachers' understanding of inclusion, evidence of professional growth, and to determine professional development needs to advance the successful implementation of inclusion.

Member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were employed to ensure accuracy of the teachers' voices in the critical stories that they told. Participating teachers, principal, and school counselor were provide copies of the audio-tape transcription and time to expand or clarify the text to best represent their perspectives. Triangulation of data was achieved through interviews, observations, and school documents.

Beyond member checks and triangulation, the public researchers worked towards maintaining a sense of fidelity to the teachers' stories, the vision of the principal to achieve a successful inclusion model, and a commitment to facilitate professional development through the inquiry process. Blumenfeld-Jones (1995) has explored fidelity as criteria for evaluating the quality of narrative inquiry. He has noted how narrative inquiry involves a "science/art conjunction" (p. 26). The science part of the inquiry seeks objective truth while the qualitative part seeks the aesthetic value and relies on subjective interpretation. Blumenfeld-Jones (1995) proposed these dimensions be joined through accurately chronicling events while emplotting them into a meaningful and believable story. He defined fidelity as the act of faithfulness and integrity on the part of the researcher to preserve "the worth and dignity of

the teller” (p 27). While the classroom observations and coding of the narrative stories achieved the science side of the inquiry process, the process of narrative story-telling and focus-group dialogue sessions pushed towards the aesthetics of capturing the story of becoming inclusive in practice. This is the work of fidelity and intersubjectivity in scholar-practitioner education (Moss, 2004b).

Unlike researchers who position themselves in an objective position in relationship to subjects and programs being studied, the project design purposefully blurred boundaries between the role of the public co-authors and their commitment to facilitating professional development through inquiry. These obscure boundaries between Glenda and Jane from the university and elementary participants in the “Plug-In” program removed obstacles from the goal of practicing from a scholar-practitioner point of view in which both the university researcher-participants and the participant-researchers could emerge as scholar-practitioners. *Narrative Texts as Data Defined*

The data sources for this study included classroom observations, individual interviews of members directly affected by the inclusion model, and focus-group dialogue sessions with those same members. Fifteen 45-minute individual interviews, scheduled over a two day period, were audio-taped and transcribed into narrative texts in the spring of 2005. Four 45-minute individual interviews with the new teachers were conducted in the fall of 2005. Sixteen 30-minute individual interviews, scheduled over a two day period, were audio-taped and transcribed into narrative texts in the spring of 2006. The interviews were conducted using the elements of post-formal inquiry—origins, context, processes, and patterns. The interviews allowed the participants to reflect on the history of the plug-in program and how these practices had influenced their teaching and learning processes in the inclusive classroom.

Two 90-minute cluster-group dialogue sessions were audio-taped and transcribed into narrative texts. These public arenas provided an opportunity to express views, and at the same time to hear how they were similar or different in their thinking to others in the program. Nineteen 30 to 45-minute classroom observations were conducted to observe first hand the classroom strategies of inclusion

during 2004-2005 and again during 2005-2006. In the 7 different classrooms, the students with disabilities were involved with students who did not have a learning disability. This Plug-in inclusion model was brought about in a variety of different methods from flexible and leveled group activities, to peer mentoring with different students, to individual learning exercises. Each of these sources contributed a slightly different view of the complexities of this inclusive program. For this aspect of the study we used the original interviews of the participants and their voices are heard in the narrative.

The Origins of Turtleland's "Plug-In" Program

The origins of Turtleland's "Plug-In" program cannot be separated from the politics of Public Law 221, No Child Left Behind, and the presence of a new principal, who came to Turtleland in the middle of "No Child Left Behind." The new principal, Michael, was keenly aware that the test scores for the students with learning disabilities is part of the percentage that keeps the school under study from making some gains on achievement scores. He was surprised to find that ninety-six percent of the special education students were not passing standardized state tests because the school was not lacking in strong teacher.

Michael noticed an inclusion setup that made him very uncomfortable. Inclusion was defined within a "pull-out" model. Three special education teachers and two IA's [instructional assistants] were included in two rooms that were connected with the wall open, and a multitude of kids in and out of the room throughout the day. There were dividers everywhere. It looked like a dungeon, and it was very noisy. Michael couldn't pay attention to what was actually going on during his initial observations. He inquired with the teachers, "I could not teach in that setting; I wouldn't even be able to concentrate enough." The teachers told him that they could not either. He began to ask probing questions, "Do you think that the kids can?" The answer was "no." So he sat down the entire special education team and asked, "Would we want our kids in this situation?" Every single person said "no." Then, Michael asked, "Why don't we change it?" That began the change process, described by Michael.

So, we gave each teacher their own room. It was really hard because at that point those three teachers had become like a family, and now I was separating them. But once I separated them and made them clear out half of their clutter, there was an immediate response of “Oh, my gosh, we miss the collaboration, but for the kids this is greater.”

We kept looking at our data and the next year the same information from ISTEP. I pulled up our percentages of pass/fail kids of special ed with the state, and we were below the state passing rate. I said, “This is an issue, and this is an issue that is not going to go away.” I told them we have done one step that we know is very healthy, but I am uncomfortable still with where we are going. Great teachers, but I am not sure that we are utilizing the program correctly.

While the fall of 2004 marks a distinct point at which Turtleland Elementary School implemented an inclusion program called “Plug-In,” it is clear that the history of the educational concept dates back at least fifteen years in the school. The concept is characterized by Julie, a general education teacher, and Courtney, a resource teacher at the time, team teaching. Courtney, now the special education coordinator remembers that experience from at least fifteen years ago.

There were a couple different teachers that I team taught with. That was my first experience to actually be plugged into the general education classroom. Both of those situations were during a reading time. At that time our school grouped for reading, so it was the classroom that had what we called the low readers. Those were the kids that had not emerged as much into their grade level reading. My assistant and I team taught with a third grade teacher, so we were three adults in the room for small group instruction. We were still teaching from the grade level books but were able to give more extension and review of some of the skills. That teacher and I would meet each week to plan and decide who was going to cover each lesson. In another situation, the Title I teacher and I team taught with a second grade teacher. Both of those situations came to a halt because we adopted a new reading series, and some of the structure of the general

education reading was changed, resulting in all students being leveled for reading. More recently, as children needed support, either an assistant or I would go into the classroom. This is the first year that we have done it across the board because we had the structure to do it.

This new structure was by design and is what Turtleland Elementary calls the "Plug-In Program." In exploring where the concept came from fifteen years ago, there is no definitive explanation. It started as inquiry in practice when the resource teacher posed a "what if" to the general education teacher.

I don't know. I think the third-grade teacher and I started talking about it, and I said, "We have a group of kids we have already identified as needing assistance in reading. What if I just came to your room? We gave them a double dose. It wasn't like we had read about it. The principal was very supportive of whatever we wanted to try, so it wasn't necessarily a principal initiated. To be honest, I don't remember.

The teachers' narrative of initiating change in practice is not uncommon from the experiential point of view of the co-authors. One author worked as an early childhood inclusion teacher in a rural setting in North Carolina, and the other author worked as a middle school general education teacher with many students identified for services in a "pull-out program" in East Texas in the eighties and nineties. At Turtleland Elementary, there was little evidence that the teachers had gone to the research ten or fifteen years ago to seek out literature to support their ideas for practice or had conducted research to examine the changed practice for effectiveness. This is not to devalue impulse that often accompanies the creative imagination. Educational philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1978) wrote, "The paradox which wrecks so many promising theories of education is that the training which produces skill is very apt to stifle imaginative zest. Skill demands repetition, and imaginative zest is tinged with impulse" (p. 338). Fifteen years ago, the resource and general education teachers at Turtleland, both trained with teaching skills and current practices, acted on impulse to actualize their professional evaluation of the way they had always done things, pulling students out of the general education classroom to provide

required services. In the current project, teachers are asked to go beyond acting on professional creativity and provide evidence of effectiveness.

The experiences that teachers in the program refer to as examples of “plug-in” in the past at Turtleland, realize that what they did was called team teaching rather than plug-in. Courtney explains, “We did not call it plug-in. We called it team teaching. That term came about by the office’s use, similar to the use of “pull-out.” When I started special education teaching, the choices were consulting with the general education teacher, making sure materials or suggestions for accommodations were in place, or pulling students out to teach them in the resource room. I don’t remember when we would have started calling what we are now doing “plug-in.”

The history of “plug-in” at Turtleland Elementary was further corroborated by Stephanie, the fifth-grade special education teacher.

If I remember my years, this is my ninth year. When I first started, plug-in was pretty much not here at the time. As the years went by, I gradually started trying to plug into a low reading group when the kids [special education and general education] were on the same level. We actually started five years ago. Jenny and I got to talking about what it would be like to team teach and do a “plug-in” situation with gifted and special ed kids, so we are the ones who started it probably 5 years ago. We clustered all my fifth graders [special education children] at the time. I think there were about 20. We clustered all the gifted kids, too, into Jenny’s and Angela’s rooms. So, the gifted teacher, the two general education teachers, and I were together. All morning we had reading/language arts time. We had four teachers divided up into small groups. That’s how it started, and pretty much until last year that is what we had done, at least in fifth grade. I think that is why 5th grade teachers are so much more comfortable with the whole process.

Her concept of "plug-in" was not decontextualized from an earlier history. She actually did her student teaching at Turtleland with the special education coordinator. She remembers the coordinator "plugged-in."

I actually did my student teaching here with [the special education coordinator], and she "plugged-in" and team taught in third-grade reading. So I had that experience coming in. It depended on the kids. We had quite a few years where kids were just so far behind the "plug-in" situation just didn't work, and we needed to pull those kids and remediate.

The fifth-grade special education teacher learned about "plug-in" in college, where it was defined as a situation where the special education teacher goes into the classroom and team teaches or co-teaches with the general education teacher. It was theorized that it was usually more for students who were close to grade level.

It was apparent from multiple teachers' narratives that this configuration of general and special education teachers teaming for instruction was common for fifth graders for at least five years before the official structure implemented for grades two through five in 2004, and kindergarten and first in 2005. A common theme that ran through Courtney's narratives was the importance of matching appropriate services to the students' needs. It was hard to tell how much of her perspective was holding on to the old program and how much was based on professional perspective. She continued to serve students in the resource room during the first year of implementation of the "Plug-In" program.

We have tried to hold true to the fact that you need to provide a range of services because a number of years ago we were given the mandate from the co-op director that you will hire a consultant to provide services for students' needs. What was interesting in my mind is thinking it might be nice to have that as an option, but without knowing what certain kids we needed to service, how would we insure the consultants could provide the services. I don't go with the

trends, such as now everybody is going to be solely in the general education class, and we forget that it is okay to sometimes pull kids out and give a small group of one on one help.

The post-formal inquiry into the origins of the “Plug-In” program contextualizes it in the politics of special education legislation at the national, state, and local levels. The time and space to reflect on the practices at Turtleland Elementary made it possible for the participating educators impacted by trends, policies, and laws, to evaluate those and make decisions in the best interest of the students they serve. This evaluation was based on the teachers’ perception of what was best for the students at Turtleland.

In the case of this study, it became clear that some of those most directly affected by change are actually most involved in the decision-making process. Michael, Turtleland principal, under pressure to raise the achievement scores of special education students, sent the three resource teachers and instructional assistants to visit other schools because their specialized population had a higher percentage of passing ISTEP. It is common for inquiry in P-12 practice to take this format of going to see what is being done in a school posting successful achievement scores. The inquiry team was looking to see if other schools were doing something they were not doing. They were looking for new ideas.

They were very impressed with the clustering and team teaching, but then Stephanie realized that Turtleland’s fifth-grade team was already doing this because she was “plugged in during science and social studies.” The model schools were only teaming for reading/language arts and math. It became clear that what Turtleland was calling “plug-in,” other schools call “clustering.” Stephanie noted that teachers at Turtleland “go back and forth” between the terms “plug-in” and “clustering.”

Robert, the third and fourth-grade resource teacher at Turtleland Elementary was included in the site-visit to another campus during the inquiry into inclusion practices. He described a mixture of excitement and concern. The teachers worked well together and were open to having the students with IEPs in the classroom, but Turtleland teachers were concerned when they saw a disengaged girl with

Down syndrome sitting in the classroom. She did not appear to be doing even a modified version of the assignments the other students were doing. The other students were being respectful to her, which was a positive thing, but challenging students who would be in the moderate program at Turtleland was important. The rest of the special education students seemed to be working at a higher level than those at Turtleland. The teachers in this study were really excited about the way the students with learning disabilities were engaged in doing assignments much more advanced than what they provided for their own students. One participating teacher analyzed his own teaching and said, "My impression of some of my instruction of my first year or year and a half here is that we water the curriculum down a little bit too much." He really liked the idea of challenging students with meaningful learning activities in the classroom, such as project based assignments.

The teachers met with their principal and he said, "Okay, how can we make this work? How can we get you guys out in the classroom all day with five classes per grade level here in the school? How is that going to work?" That is when the fifth grade teachers started talking more about the clustering with two general education teachers team teaching with a certified special education teacher "plugging in" so there would be three adults with fifty students. In the fifth grade they had an extreme situation where there were nineteen or twenty students with learning disabilities. It was a complex process to pick which teachers they thought would be best. The special education teachers were nervous about the choices because they were concerned as to whether general education teachers would still want to participate by January. Personalities were a consideration the decision making because of the team teaching.

General education teachers were recruited by the principal in consultation with the special education team. They were asked to attend a meeting in the spring of 2004. The special education team explained to the general education teachers what they wanted to do with the classrooms. From the point of view of Lisa, a fourth-grade general education teacher, the special education team proposed the

“Plug-In” program. She perceived it was their idea, and her understanding of where the idea originated influenced her own evaluation of the program.

Narrative of ‘Plug-In’ as part of Teacher Education

Michael, the principal, has a rich history as an elementary classroom teacher and parent of two children identified for special services. His history is grounded in his early teaching experiences in Florida.

When I started in education in Florida, we really didn’t have many pull-out programs. Due to lack of resources, it was basically pull-in. All the kids seemed the same because it was inner city there. In the group that I had, they wouldn’t have pulled out. Basically we had to meet the all the needs on our own in the classroom. I left teaching for a while, and when I came back into the teaching field several years later, still in Florida, it was basically a pull-out program. It was frustrating for me as a teacher to have kids keep leaving at very inconvenient times. When they came back, I had to somehow catch them up with everything that they just missed, and it didn’t seem to work very well.

Courtney has “been out of school twenty years,” and doesn’t remember the term “plug-in” being “discussed” in her university courses. She recognizes, “This has been something that has come about, since I’ve been hired here. Kristi, second grade general education teacher, reflected on the concept of “plug-in.”

I think I realized that other schools were doing more of the “plug-in” long before we were. We were very reluctant to do that. Actually long ago, when I was a student [in a state university] I had a special ed endorsement, so I was introduced to the idea even back twenty-eight years ago or however long it has been. It was not called “plug-in.”

I can’t even remember what they called it, but we were introduced to the idea that sometimes a teacher comes in and sometimes we pull-out, but I had never really seen anybody

doing that. All of the special ed schools were pretty much pull-out at that time. When I started here, there was pull-out; but I think that they were talking about it back then, either that or in my masters classes. I had heard of it, but knew that we didn't do it until last year when [our principal] brought up the idea at a teachers meeting. That was the first that I really knew we were considering doing the program.

Jenny brought her prior experience with "plug-in" to Turtleland. In about 1987 when she was in Fairfax County, Virginia, she had an experience with her oldest of four sons (two in a gifted program, one borderline gifted, and the other one smart but LD) that impacted her perspective on special education. The school was starting a new program with a LD teacher paired with a general education teacher in one classroom with thirty-five total children, seven identified LD and 28 students without learning difficulties. Some had "raised abilities." Tensions emerged.

My son was a gifted kid placed in that room, and I heard a lot of hubbub from different parents that thought that their kid would be brought down or that they would be used as tutors. I didn't have that perspective.

I thought, "Wow, two full-time teachers in a room with slightly more children would be really cool because it would be a lot smaller ratio of student to teacher." So, I thought, "I don't have a problem. I'll see." He really flourished in that environment and wasn't made responsible to carry the burden of anyone else's learning but his own. It gave him a chance to learn some real dynamic lessons about the value of everybody and how, he would come home and tell me stories, "Mom, remember I told you about this kid, he's not very good at this? Well, today he did this." It was so cool, and I thought, "Wow, that is a great experiment, or way to do it."

These experiences played a role in the development of a team-teaching situation in the fifth-grade at Turtleland in 1998.

As is the case in many schools, two fifth-grade teachers at Turtleland found themselves with an overabundance of the students with learning disabilities in their rooms. At the time Stephanie was relatively new at Turtleland. She was experiencing the frustration of trying to ensure all the general education teachers were addressing the IEP's in their classrooms. She found it hard to be in four places at once, or address the needs of multiple children in a resource room at one time. The general education teacher began to talk about her experiences in Virginia and asked her if she would be interested in team-teaching with her. She thought it was worth a try so they got serious about it by looking at the ratio of students with LD to the rest of the numbers. There were about 15 students with LD, which expanded the conversation to the possibility of a second fifth-grade teacher joining in a team-teaching with the special education teacher.

They talked out the pros and cons and decided to take the idea to the principal, who was supportive from the start. They talked about how to deal with parent phone calls because some would think that there was a negative label on that team-teaching room with special education students. The principal then called Angela, another fifth-grade teacher in for a conversation.

Angela attended the university where the researchers teach. She does not recall anyone talking about "plug in" in her education classes. She first heard this idea when the principal called her at home during her maternity leave and said, "Hey, we have a good idea for next year. Can you come in for a meeting?" She replied, "Sure." Angela's story of experience follows.

We sat down and talked. I heard about the experience in Virginia where they have all the gifted and all the LD kids together, and the LD teacher and the gifted teacher for support in one room. We decided that we were going to open up our curtain and do some team teaching with the gifted kids and the LD kids with the LD teacher in there and the gifted teacher in there. That was just for the reading and writing. We didn't have them for science or social studies. So, that's how we started it [plug-in] about five years ago.

Although most teachers had not heard the term "plug-in" during their teacher preparation, Robert was exposed to it during his student teaching placement in 2002. He was in a full inclusion fifth-grade classroom with seven special education kids included in a class of twenty-five students.

That was my first real exposure to inclusion and the resource teacher was in there for the core subjects. I guess that excluded social studies. The core subjects were reading, math and writing. Nobody left the room. That was something that was really stressed.

Central to the success was a good relationship between the general education and special education teachers. The teams were chosen based on strong relationships. They also considered a good match between teachers and students. Robert also had knowledge of "plug-in" from his middle school years in the early nineties.

I think that the teachers at my schools when I was growing up were doing "plug-in." Probably the first time that I saw that was when I was a middle school student, which was in the early nineties. There were special ed students included in the regular classroom. I was a regular ed student. I didn't know who the students were that had learning disabilities, but I knew what students had a moderate disability. You [could] visually tell a couple of the students that were in my particular English class, and there was a teacher in there with that student for the one hour and twenty-five minute block that we were in there everyday. The assignments looked different a lot of times. They weren't the same assignments that we had but they were along the same concepts. When I heard the term "plug-in" here, I immediately thought back to those particular situations, thinking that is what it would be like.

An Experiential Definition of Plug-In as an Inclusion Model

The post-formal inquiry was used by design so Turtleland teachers could reflect upon the origins of the inclusion program, their understanding of what plug-in means in the NCLB context within which it was being implemented in their rural school, the processes through which it was being implemented,

and the patterns of classroom practices (i.e. differentiated instruction) that were emerging. It was also designed as a scholarly project in that it allowed teachers to explore how their work is situated in the broader discourse on inclusive education.

With the inclusion of multiple voices, the voices of those most closely impacted by the plug-in program, multiple definitions of the “Plug-in” model of inclusion emerged. The “Plug-in” program was defined as clustering or team teaching, as presented by Stephanie. When specifically defining “plug-in” from a pragmatics standpoint, it referred to inclusion of special education students in the regular education classroom and process, inclusion of special education teachers in the regular education classroom in a fluid way, inclusion of the special education teacher in the regular education classroom in an isolated way, and inclusion of the regular education teachers in the special education process. Karen, the school counselor described clustering from an operative point of view.

“Clustering” seems to be the operational definition of plug-in at Turtleland, where the program appears more fluid and inclusive of all students and all adults.

Here, the students are plugged into the regular classroom and we accommodate for them in that regular classroom, with maybe three adults or two adults instead of just one teacher, and those two/three adults are helping all the kids, not just the cluster of kids that we have put in there.

Karen distinguished the program under study as a blurring of the boundaries between who serves whom. General education teachers serve both general education and special education students, and resource teachers serve both special education and general education students.

The multiple aspects of inclusion were enriching as teachers grew to understand the dynamic and inclusive nature of the model. The definition that indicated a technician view of plug-in with the special education teacher in a separate role with the special education students within the regular

education room was problematic and an example of how the inquiry process resulted in identifying areas of needed professional development.

To understand the varying perspective, it is important to know from the start that the official "Plug-In" program was implemented in grades two through five in the fall of 2004. Kindergarten and first grade were added in the fall of 2005. Reflecting on her experiences, Sarah, second -grade instructional assistant understood "plug-in" as a process limited to students with IEPs, who would "occasionally plug into the special education classroom." They were either plugged into the special education classroom, which described the K-1 students during the first year of implementation, or they were plugged into general education classrooms as practiced in grades two through five during the first year of implementation.

The schedule of Courtney and Sarah was "a little bit different from the schedule of grades two through five cluster teacher. The K-1 classes continued with the former pull-out process of servicing students with IEPs. The instructional assistant went on to explain that servicing students with IEPs is embedded in a school-wide leveling for math and reading. In that way, the instructional assistant did "get out of the [resource] classroom," but had "a grouping for reading program and math program in 2nd grade." She did leave the classroom to participate in the school-wide leveling for math and reading and saw herself and the resource teacher as playing very "flexible" roles of serving where they were needed in the whole school instructional plan.

A year later, after kindergarten and first grade were included in the official "Plug-In" program, this same instructional assistant defined "plug-in" as "all learning disabled students with an IEP are contained in one or two classrooms. The majority of it is in one classroom, but there are instances where there are two classrooms."

Molly is a third-grade general education teacher at Turtleland. Central to her definition of plug-in was the inclusion of students with IEPs in the general classroom all day long.

The kids are plugged-in the general education classroom in the subject areas that they qualify, that maybe some schools would pull-out into a separate classroom. But we keep them plugged-in in the general education class with modifications or with extra assistance.

Jenny, the fifth-grade general education teacher from Virginia, defined plug-in as the resource teacher, special education certified teacher or instructional assistant, in the general education classroom guiding the general teacher on making modifications for students with IEPs. In practice, plug-in played out in the fifth-grade setting with having a full time LD resource person with the general education teachers all day, which they see as “wonderful.” The only issue has been the absence of the resource person during spelling. The fifth-grade resource teacher was pulled out to do the 1-3 literacy during that time.

Julie, a fourth-grade general education teacher, could not separate her understanding of plug-in from her ongoing experience as a teacher in Turtleland Elementary. She defined “plug-in” by the integration of children with learning disabilities in the general education classroom to achieve what has been noted in the research. She stated,

What I have experienced with “plug-in” teaching this year is learning disabled children are in the general education classroom. It has been noted that when a learning disabled child is with other students of higher ability, by observing those students they achieve higher than what they do when they are grouped in the same level of students as they are. It is shown that students observe and mock what other children do.

She connected her understanding to her undergraduate education classes at the university 20 years earlier, and then went on to say,

I guess there were laws made that the children were supposed to meet and not to be separated.

They were to come in and work with other students of higher ability.

And that was taught in the class. I don’t know the number, but it was a Public Law.

Julie remembered that before 1985, students were not separated by abilities or special needs; everyone was grouped only by grade level. She did not see "plug-in" as a new program, but something the school had been doing for at least 15 years.

Oh my goodness, we've been doing the plug in, where she would take part of the students and bring them back to the regular classroom, I would say a good 15 years that way.

Julie did not see "plug-in" as a new concept. What she saw as new was the clustering of the students with IEPs in two general education classroom as contrasted to earlier years when they were divided among all of the grade-level classrooms.

Plug-in to me means the person with the IEP will be in your classroom for all the general subjects except for their handicap and they would pull out and go to the special ed room where they would get extra instruction on their disabilities. That's the normal. Now the procedure that we have done this year is a little bit different in that 2 teacher have all the students with IEPs. And then we work together with team teaching with those students along with general ed students too. We mixed them together, unless it is literacy. Then we level the kids.

I thought it was plug in, but maybe other people called it pull-out; so I 'm not sure. To me I think plug in and pull in and plug in and pull out are about the same thing. You have a special group of students that are different than the general education class that to me is plug-in pull-out, whatever you are working with that particular group to get them educated.

Julie helps us to see the complexity of finding common language in special education services. She also helps us to see what Courtney, the special education coordinator, holds up as the goal—identifying the best strategy for each child's need. Sometimes this is inclusion in the general education classroom and other times it means pulling the student out for more individualized instruction in a resource room, appearing as a configuration of plug-in and pull-out. Perhaps the distinguishing practice that determines whether a school's program is framed by an inclusive perspective is the level of commitment to plugging

special education students and adult human resources into the general education classroom as contrasted to a commitment to maintaining resources in a separate room where special education students spend more of their time. Integration and collaboration between general education and special education resources is characteristic of “plug-in” at Turtleland Elementary. Internal restructuring and integration of new teachers is also part of the process.

New Teachers’ Reflection on Turtleland “Plug-In”

Following the first year of implementation of “Plug-In” at Turtleland Elementary, two teachers resigned, resulting in a restructuring of clusters. The third-grade general education teachers resigned, taking positions in other schools. Because of numbers, there would be only one third-grade cluster room in 2005-2006, and the third and fourth-grade resource teacher from the first year of implementation applied for the position, wanting to teach from the point of view of a general education teacher with special education students clustered in his classroom. Also, this made it possible to hire another resource teacher, increasing the human resources needed to meet the needs of students. Kindergarten and first-grade were added to the “Plug-In” or “Cluster” program. Laura, the first grade teacher, had the following perspective of ‘plug-in.’

To me “Plug-in” is when we have gone into the classroom to serve the students. Worked in the classroom with the teachers, but mainly working with our students within the whole classroom. Instead of pulling them out and working with them. That’s what I think ‘plug-in’ is. I see it as having someone help me as a general education teacher meet the needs of the kids. I see it as someone coming in to help me, being a team teacher with me, but also giving me ideas on how to teach the children that I am working with that have those needs of a “plug-in” program.

Emily, the general education kindergarten teacher added to the definition.

This year, no it is pretty much like other years that I have had children with special needs. (The inclusion coordinator) is in my room at high support times, literacy groups, center time, you

know we do calendar, we do story, we do some of the finger plays and share reading activities are on our own, it kind of depends on our schedule.

Jessica, the first grade general education teacher, understood "plug-in" as a reference to students with special needs being included in a typical general education classroom and plugged into the general education curriculum with special help as needed.

Sometimes we have an instructional assistant that comes to help, or Courtney, if they need some extra help; but they are plugged into to the regular program rather than being pulled-out—kind of opposite.

Trisha, a resource teacher from Turtleland Middle School moved to the elementary school to work with the fifth-grade cluster, and the fifth-grade resource teacher moved to the third and fourth-grade cluster. This resource teacher captured the definition of "Plug-In" from an operational point of view in the elementary school, distinguishing it from the operational definition at the middle school. In the middle school, "plug-in" appears to be a noun, describing the resource teacher.

A "plug-in" is a special ed teacher or special ed assistant who goes into the general education classroom, and they are there for any support that the a special ed student or gen ed student might need in that classroom. Their first priority is the special ed student, but they are in there with the gen ed teacher trying to help all students that need help or support, thus "plugging-in." The "plug-in" is the special ed teacher or assistant that goes into the classroom, is there to assist the teacher. It is not like team teaching where they both have teaching responsibilities. The "plug-in" is just there to assist. They are there to maybe help with the note taking, where kids take down notes. I am referring to middle school, because that is what I know. Last year I taught middle school. They might be there to retest. They are there to implement any of the accommodations that any special ed kids have. They are an extra hand, maybe an extra person to form a smaller group. As far as instructing, that really isn't their major role.

Trisha went on to explain that what the teachers are doing at Turtleland Elementary is not “plug-in” but a “clustering/team teaching approach.” When asked to tell the history of “plug-in” at Turtleland Elementary, she was confused by the term and had this to say,

I guess I see it more as a team teaching program. I see “plug-in” and team teaching as two different things. I guess their “plug-in” is the teacher or the assistant is there to assist and to help. I see the program that we have now as a team teaching situation where both the gen ed teacher and the special ed teacher work together. They plan together, they divide up the instruction part, they divide up the grading part; like there are basically two teachers working together, teaching together, planning together, doing lessons together, they both have equal roles. One day one is leading the instruction and the next day the other is leading the instruction and the other one assists, so it is very equal. Where in the “plug-in” situation? I see it as the gen ed teacher does most of the instruction, and you have the special ed teacher or the special ed assistant who helps.

Throughout these narratives we have shared how teachers and administrators at Turtleland Elementary define their program. It was with these differing definitions of “Plug-in” that we have continued to work to find the best ways to evaluate the program. Plug-in was defined as special education students plugged into the general education classrooms; special education students plugged into the general education curriculum; resource teachers and instructional assistants plugged into the general education classroom; and general education teachers plugged into special education curriculum. These different viewpoints had to be addressed before we could develop a plan on how to evaluate the program.

As presented here, we had to envision how the participants saw their program before we could evaluate its effectiveness. The success of the Plug-In program depends on the perspective of the teachers and their roles in the program. We were intrigued by the multiple definitions and

understandings of the history of the program and wanted to share how a statement as simple as 'define your inclusion program' can be rich and varied in voices of the participants. What is in a name? It depends on context, processes, and procedures in specific situations, and place in the literature in general. This project situates "Plug-In" in the literature and includes the voices of classroom teachers in the academy.

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