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Exclusion in public education : the experiences of parents with young children with special needs

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**EXCLUSION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION: THE EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS WITH
YOUNG CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

by

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**A Major Research Paper
presented to Ryerson University**

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts
In the Program of
Early Childhood Studies**

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EXCLUSION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION: THE EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Master of Arts
Early Childhood Studies
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ABSTRACT

There has been widespread interest amongst scholars and activists in researching the concept of inclusion of young children with special needs in early childhood settings and public education. This qualitative research study provides insight into the lives of Canadian parents who have children with special needs in public education. Two interviews were conducted with three parents, all of whom have children with special needs in kindergarten and grade one. Key findings were interpreted from a social justice perspective which indicated that children with special needs are excluded in the public education system in a variety of ways. They do not have opportunities for inclusion with their typically developing peers. Parents become advocates as a result and struggle with accessing appropriate services for their children with special needs. Recommendations are made for implementing change within the education system and areas for future research are identified.

Key Words:

‘inclusion’, ‘inclusion of children with special needs’, ‘elementary school inclusion’, ‘parent’s perspectives on inclusion’, ‘parent’s experiences of exclusion’

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Dedication

To our little angel Raji...you are the reason I do what I do.

To all the females in the world who have been told that post secondary education was something
they should not, would not or could not do.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

There has been much debate amongst researchers about the inclusion of children with special needs into inclusive early childhood and public school settings. "Inclusion means that children with special needs attend preschool, child care, educational and recreational programs with their peers. Inclusion is about belonging, being valued, and having choices" (Allen, Paasche, Langford & Nolan, 2006, p. 3). Educational inclusion is defined as "...a child's right to belong to her/his local mainstream school, to be valued for who s/he is and to be provided with all support s/he needs to thrive" despite exceptionalities (Rieser, 2006b, p. 168). Inclusion from an educational standpoint has been defined as "...serving students with a full range of abilities and disabilities in the general education classroom, with appropriate in-class support" (Bennett, Deluca & Bruns, 1997). Villa and Thousand (2005) stated that inclusion "...is the opposite of segregation and isolation. Segregated education creates a permanent underclass of students and conveys a strong message to those students (children with special needs) that they do not measure up, fit in or belong" (p. 5). Children with special needs are defined as "...a child who has a physical or mental impairment that is likely to continue for a prolonged period of time and who as a result thereof is limited in activities pertaining to normal living as verified by objective psychological or medical findings and includes a child with a developmental disability" (Ontario Statutes and Legislation, 2002, para. 9). The term "special needs" is used interchangeably in the Early Childhood Education literature (Allen et al., 2006) included terms such as 'children with special needs', and 'children with exceptionalities.' The Disabilities Studies literature (Rieser, 2006a/b) used the term "children with disabilities", "disabled children" and "disabled people".

Inclusion has become the dominant ideology in educational settings. Jones, Thorn, Chow, Thompson and Wilde (2002) stated that “the inclusion of all special needs students into the regular classroom setting is rapidly becoming the dominant educational ideology” (p. 625). Despite this general acceptance of the principles of inclusion, Rafferty, Boettcher and Griffin (2001) contended that “...children’s access to inclusive programs has grown in recent years, although inclusion options are still not offered to a substantial proportion of families” (p. 267). “In fact, it seems a paradox that while the current inclusion movement has been largely promoted by those advocating for students with severe disabilities, the most significant increase in inclusive placements over the last few years has occurred for those students with the mildest forms of disability” (Palmer, Fuller, Arora & Nelson, 2001, p. 467).

Inclusion is at times confused with integration, a process which can take several forms. Rieser (2006b) asserted that integration can be implemented in a variety of ways. For example, periodic integration is where children from special schools are brought into mainstream schools for an integration period and/or event. As well, integration can be geographical, where children with special needs may be educated on the same campus as their typically developing peers but they do not socialize. Social integration, where children with special needs share social times/events with their typically developing peers, but they are not taught together and finally, there is functional integration, where children with special needs are taught in the same class as their typically developing peers, but are not included in daily activities together. Rieser (2006b) explained that there is an assumption that the child with special needs is assimilated into mainstream school, yet the school environment remains unchanged and accommodations are not made to ensure that the child is included. He further explained that “inclusion is not a static state like integration. It is a continuing process involving a major change in school ethos and is about

building a school community that accepts and values difference” (p. 168). Furthermore, Rieser (2006b) maintained that “inclusion fundamentally challenges the traditional approach which regards impairment and disabled people as marginal, or an ‘after-thought’, instead of recognizing that impairment and disablement are a common experience of humanity and should be a central issue in the planning and delivery of a human service such as education” (p. 169). Hence, Jones et al. (2002) asserted that if “inclusion is to become a successful reality, one crucial point must be acknowledged; it won’t work if we don’t want it to, and if we want it to, we must work at it” (p. 625). Considering several variations of attitudes exist about the integration and the inclusion of all children with special needs into society, the success of inclusive education is largely dependant on the attitudes of people, including students and parents. Teacher training is also essential as is supportive administrators in the education system (Allen et al., 2006; Carrington & Robinson, 2006; Jones et al., 2002; Panayiotopoulos & Kerfoot, 2007).

Objective and Significance of Study

Despite the move towards inclusion, research showed that children with special needs are being segregated and are being discriminated against in several ways in the education system (Bennett et al., 1997; Bernhard, Freire, Bascunan, Arenas, Verga & Gana, 2004; Buysse, Skinner & Grant, 2001; Carrington & Robinson, 2006; Rafferty et al., 2001; Rieser, 2006b). Research is therefore, needed to explore the experiences of parents and children with special needs in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), given the multicultural mosaic of Toronto. The research specifically pertaining to the experiences of families who have children with special needs within a multicultural Canadian context is lacking. Additionally, research is warranted for diverse families, including those from different cultural, religious, linguistic, socioeconomic and immigration status. Cannella (1997) supported these ideas and challenges early childhood

developmental theories when she asserted that “the construction of universal child development is a form of colonization, a cultural imperialism” (p. 93). She asserted that early childhood settings and the public education systems institutionalize children in an ethnocentric culture “when cross-cultural research reveals that all people do not follow normative child development expectations, those who are different are labeled as deficient” (p. 93). The combination of a cross-cultural group of parents and those who have children with special needs would enable these minority groups to discuss their encounters with the education system. Furthermore, research on parent’s perspectives and experiences with children just entering the education system in kindergarten, grade one and two is critical and also quite limited. Exploration of early experiences in public education would provide insight into practices that may impact the educational pathways of children with special needs.

This study is carried out from a social justice perspective. The researcher attempted to gain a deeper understanding of parent’s lived experiences with their children in the Toronto and Greater Toronto area. Cannella (1997) stated that “...those who are younger have been controlled, oppressed, labeled and limited. Their voices have been silenced under the weight of adult psychological, educational, and policy constructions of and for them” (p. 162). She further explained the social justice perspective as the promotion of equity as human rights, not exclusive to adults, but including children. She contended that in order to support social justice, we “...would require continual critique but would always focus on broadening possibilities, embracing the struggle for liberation, avoiding constructions of the Other, and aiming for just and caring communities” (p. 163). This is the focus of this research study, giving parents the opportunities to disclose their relations with the school system, giving equal power to their

children's experiences in a society that treats children as incomplete human beings (Cannella, 1997).

Chopra and French (2004) asserted "...parents are major role players in the education of children with severe disabilities in inclusive school settings" (p. 240) yet limited information is known about their experiences (Carrington & Robinson, 2006; Jones et al., 2002). Cannella (1997) agreed that parents are involved in their children's lives in many forms and naturally become their child's protector and advocate when children are unable to express their views. Children spend a large proportion of their day in the education system, which is dominated by power and control, exerted onto children and their parents by educators who believe they can make decisions in the best interests for all children (Cannella, 1997).

This researcher attempted to give power back to parents, to give them the chance to speak about their perspectives in the best interests of their children. This study gained insight into the lives of a diverse sample of Canadian families by using a qualitative case study approach. Parents who have children with special needs, in their early years, in public schools were interviewed about their experiences with the public education system. The purpose was to empower parents and allow them the opportunity to articulate how interactions at the school may have impacted their child's and families' lives.

The History and Current Movement Towards the Inclusion of Children with Special Needs

Rieser (2006a) asserted that during the medieval time period, infants with disabilities were discarded and infanticides were common. It was the norm to drown babies with disabilities as they were considered imperfect and lacking in beauty. Other societies considered them to be sinners and being born with a disability was considered a form of punishment for evil acts. Some believed that people with disabilities were forms of witches; women who gave birth to

such babies were put to death with their infants. Parents were considered to be the cause of their child's disabilities (Chopra & French, 2004) and as a result, were penalized severely. In fact, into the middle of the twentieth century, families, communities and society denied the existence of children with special needs and kept these children out of sight (Allen et al., 2006) by discarding of them into institutions and asylums (Rieser, 2006b).

Society's and individual's attitudes about people with special needs have impacted inclusive practices, or a lack thereof, historically and currently. Rieser (2006a) contended that:

The well-spring of our (people with disabilities) oppression comprises deeply held social attitudes that reflect generations of prejudice, fear and discrimination towards disabled people in education, work and social life. The main reasons are negative attitudes and stereotypes which are based on untrue ideas that have been around for thousands of years and which are amazingly persistent. (p. 143)

More specifically, children with special needs have also been historically segregated, marginalized, oppressed and discriminated against. Families that had children with special needs were encouraged to institutionalize them (Allen et al., 2006). It can be argued that these ideologies and practices exist to date and significantly affect the successful inclusion of children with special needs in the education system. These practices are those that exclude children with special needs from engaging socially and educationally with their typically developing peers. Rieser (2006b) asserted "it is clear that it has much more to do with attitudes and commitment than anything else. It is also clear that where integration has been planned and resourced, and where all staff have developed it as a whole school policy, it (inclusion) is much more successful" (p. 163).

Panayiotopoulos and Kerfoot (2007) examined and discussed an educational system in Florida that "...has been working for the past 14 years to change the trend of disaffection and disenfranchisement in schools" (p. 60). It is affiliated with a national organization and reportedly has the largest exclusion and drop-out prevention program in the United States of America. It reaches more than 300 000 children in 54 communities across 33 states. "One of the main aims of the programme is to help school teachers to understand the source of the problem rather than disregard it and move quickly to get the student out of the classroom" (p. 60). The four basic principles behind the movement are simple; that every child needs a safe place to learn and grow as it is generally accepted that children with special needs live in a dysfunctional and sometimes hostile environment; every child can benefit from and should have the opportunity to develop a one-to-one relationship with a caring adult; school exclusion results a lack of marketable, vocational and academic skills and exclusion results in further marginalization with no chance to give back to the community and no expectations from student's lives.

Although the trend over the last 20 years is highly suggestive that educational facilities are engaging in more inclusive practices (Bennett et al., 1997; Buysse, Skinner & Grant, 2001; Chopra & French, 2004; Kasari, Freeman, Bauminger & Alkin, 1999; Rieser, 2006b; Roeher Institute, 2000) many educational environments continue to segregate (Kasari et al., 1999) and/or integrate (Rieser, 2006b), provide one to one workers (Chopra & French, 2004), or practice reverse integration where a small group of typically developing children are added to a specialized program for children with special needs (Rafferty et al., 2001). These practices are not inclusive and function to support exclusion.

Carrington and Robinson (2006) discussed historical assumptions that educators, administrators and schools made and reinforced into practice in order to justify the exclusion of

children with special needs. These vary and include the belief that children are deficient and schools need to fix them; that learning takes place in the head alone and not in the body as a whole; that everyone should learn in the same way; that learning takes place in the classroom alone and not necessarily in the world; and that children are either smart or not and they must be changed to fit the curriculum, not the reverse.

Certainly, a variety of programs exist in a number of educational settings with several different care providers including "...general education, special education or early intervention" programs (Kasari et al., 1999, p. 299). Although some educators believe these practices support inclusion, they actually hinder successful inclusion and inclusive spaces for children with special needs. Successful implementation of an inclusive educational environment involves more than having children with special needs present in a classroom with typically developing peers (Allen et al., 2006; Carrington & Robinson, 2006; Jones et al., 2002; Rieser, 2006b). Jones et al. (2002) stated that it involves acceptance and appropriate socialization between typically developing peers and children with special needs and asserted that "...these factors are paramount in fostering an environment conducive to learning, and hence, the success of total inclusion" (p. 625). Allen et al., (2006) agreed and stated that "inclusion is about accepting and valuing human diversity and providing the necessary support so that all children and their families can successfully participate in the programs of their choice (p. 3).

The Medical Model versus the Social Model

Allen et al., (2006) asserted that "in the past two decades, people with disabilities, influenced by the civil rights and women's movements, have dramatically revised the way disability is understood" (p. 37). They explained that people with special needs in academia and activism have focused more on societal issues, such as exclusionary policies and practices, rather

than the more traditional emphasis on individual pathology, resulting in the re-defining of special needs. Panitch (2008) agreed and discussed activist mothers who, over the span of 30 years from 1960's to 1990's, drastically changed the understanding of special needs by campaigning for equity. She explained that mothers who have children with disabilities had series of encounters with discrimination, both socially and politically and advocated for organizations that worked towards social justice for children with special needs. Grassroots activism by women who have children with special needs contributed to more inclusive social, political and educational spaces for people with special needs.

Rieser (2006a) concurred and described the "...fight for the inclusion of all children, however 'severely' impaired in one mainstream education system will not make sense unless the difference between the 'social' and the 'medical' model of disability is understood" (p. 139). He discussed these models and differentiates that "the medical model sees the disabled person as the problem" and the social model "...views the barriers that prevent disabled people from participating in any situation as being what disables them" (p. 135). The medical model reinforces that the lives of people with disabilities are incomplete and professionals must intervene to assess and normalize them. Particularly, for children, he affirmed that medical model thinking "...predominates in schools where special educational needs are thought of as emanating from the individual who is seen as different, faulty and needing to be assessed and made as normal as possible" (p. 135). He further contended that discrimination against people with disabilities is socially constructed and "through fear, ignorance and prejudice, barriers and discriminatory practices develop which disables us" (Rieser, 2006a, p. 136).

Rieser (2006a) continued to support inclusion when he stated that "...instead of focusing on differentness (differences) within the individual, (if) the focus were on, for example, all

children's right to belong and to be valued in their local school, then we would be asking 'what is wrong' with the school and looking at the strengths of the child" (p. 135). This is described as the social model of disability. He asserted that "if inclusive education is to be effective, teachers have to adopt (the) social model thinking about disabled people. They must analyze the growing documentation of good practice, but they should also be aware of the barriers which prevent inclusion" (p. 158). This includes physical, communication, social, attitudinal, educational and institutional barriers, all of which create an imbalance of power. Furthermore, Rieser (2006a) stated that the answer lies in the restructuring of society primarily because the "...disabled people's individual and collective disadvantage is due to a complex form of institutional discrimination as fundamental to our society as social-class exploitation, sexism, racism or heterosexism" (p. 137).

Inclusion versus Exclusion- Parent's Perspectives

Indeed, the move towards more inclusive spaces for children has been controversial, but also has been documented as encompassing benefits for all, ranging from children in early childhood learning centres to children in the educational system, exceptional or not (Allen et al., 2006; Bennet et al., 1997; Buysse et al., 2001; Jones et al., 2002; Kasari et al., 1999; Palmer et al., 2001; Rafferty et al., 2001). These benefits include reaching educational goals, improving communication skills, improving social skills, increasing positive peer interactions, having positive role models for appropriate behaviours, educational outcomes and post school adjustment. Other benefits are documented as an increase in teacher attention as a result and access to technology or additional resources. Positive effects on typically developing peers are also evident, which include developing more accepting attitudes and perceptions of individuals

with special needs, acceptance of equal social status and a more supportive relationship with other parents, teachers and educators.

Rafferty et al. (2001) stated that, “a number of studies have indicated that parents of children with disabilities are generally supportive of opportunities for integration and that they favour the increased social contact with typically developing peers that integrated settings provide” (p. 268). In addition, Jones et al. (2002) reported that “in fact, special needs students receive about 340 percent more social interaction in inclusion classrooms than segregated classrooms” and is likely “...the engine that powers the improvement in special needs students’ academic performance in inclusion classrooms when compared to special needs students in segregated classrooms”(p. 626).

Conversely, Palmer et al., (2001) found that while some parents continue to struggle with what is the most appropriate educational setting for their child, there are a significant number of parents who are in favour of special education classes for their children with special needs. They reported that, “...the vast majority of children with severe disabilities continue to be served in traditional special day class settings with minimal integration into general education programs” (p. 468). This is in part, due to a lack of support from a “...critical mass of parents whose children with severe disabilities would be directly affected by this agenda and it is widely recognized that parental support and involvement is essential for any educational reform to succeed” (p. 468). These parents expressed appreciation for having their child in a segregated classroom as they believe “...that the type or severity of the child’s disability precludes benefit from participation in a general education classroom” (p. 473). Parents cited reasons such as complex medical needs, seizures and/or cerebral palsy, sensory impairments, lack of self help, insufficient language skills and multiple disabling conditions. Parents also expressed concerns

related to over-burdening general education teachers as their child with special needs often requires more care and attention than can be provided in an inclusive environment.

Parents expressed empathy for teachers given large teacher to student ratios, poor teaching conditions and increasing demands related to teaching general education students with diverse needs. Furthermore, Palmer et al., (2001) reported that some parents "...expressed concerns that the child's needs could not be met in a classroom with an emphasis on academic or core curriculum. Most of these parents stated a desire to have their children in an environment that emphasized basic living or functional skills" (p. 473). The authors contended that parents who view socialization as a key component to education for their children with special needs and those presenting with fewer behavioral and cognitive difficulties (hence requiring less specialized services) and whose children have spent time in general education classes tend to have a more positive perspective on inclusion. However, Palmer et al., (2001) stated:

If the general education classroom is viewed as a place where the teacher is overworked, overwhelmed, and under trained, the students are intolerant and lack control, and the curriculum is inflexible and irrelevant, then parents are unlikely to camp out to enroll their children in these programs. Inversely, parents who view the general education program at their local school as accommodating and nurturing may be more likely to favour inclusion. (p.480)

Jones et al., (2002) reported similar findings and state, "there are three main elements for this (segregation) perspective: extra attention requirements of special needs students, teacher workload and the negative consequences to regular classroom students, and the need for special programs" (p. 627). In addition, they stated that "the segregationists maintain that including all special needs students in the regular classroom in a one-size-fits-all fashion is often quite

harmful to both special needs students and regular classroom students” (p.627). Their argument is in support of segregation of children with special needs as it is believed that this population would likely struggle in an inclusive classroom as they tend to be scrutinized and are at a greater risk of being bullied. They claimed this is due in part to the lack of adaptations made to curriculum for children with special needs and the need for teachers to have special training suited to the children’s complex needs. Furthermore, they stated that this would result in strain on the education system, teachers, special needs students and regular classroom students.

Several researchers who have investigated parent’s perspectives of inclusion of children with special needs have identified that there is a gap in the literature (Bennett et al., 1997; Jones et al., 2002; Kasari et al., 1999; Rafferty et al., 2001). Current literature on inclusion in public schools existed primarily related to educators’ attitudes and available resources (Bennet et al., 1997; Kasari et al., 1999). The minimal research indicated a variety of perspectives from parents. Bennett et al., (1997) reported that these perspectives range from parents feeling that their child is in an inclusive environment at school, to feeling that parents are not in a position to make a judgment, and to feeling that their child is in an exclusive environment at school. Kasari et al., (1999) documented that parents both agree and disagree with their child being in exclusive classrooms based on individual differences. They reported that some parents are unsure of what is the best educational decision for their child and allow the schools to make the decision.

Buysse et al., (2001) have argued that having inclusive spaces is insufficient and the quality of the educational environment and programming is much more important to contribute to inclusive environments. Bennett et al., (1997), Chopra et al., (2004), Leiter and Krauss (2004) concurred on several points; parents must be advocates for their children with special needs but they are often unaware of services that can be made available, including their rights to access these types

of specialized services and the avenues necessary to pursue educational equity for their children. Panitch (2008) reported that mothers tend to become the natural advocates for their children with special needs however don't necessarily view themselves as such. She stated "...women defy gender expectations of passivity and dependence when they become active politically because their activism does not fit comfortably with traditional roles of wife and mother" (p. 28) yet are able to endure social and political scrutiny to fight for equitable rights for their children in society.

Hanson, Horn, Sandall, Beckman, Morgan, Marquart, Barnwell and Chou (2001), Bennett et al., (1997), Leiter and Krauss (2004), Kasari et al., (1999), and Palmer et al., (2001) agreed that children with special needs are too often excluded from society for the following reasons; perceived difficulties, perceived academic limitations, lack of supports, other's behaviours towards children with special needs, teachers' attitudes and/or lack of training, inappropriate curricula development and implementation and school boards' financial constraints. As a result, inclusion alone is often described as being insufficient-early care and education for children with special needs is argued as needing to be of a great quality. Certain conditions must be present in order for an educational environment to produce quality, inclusive education. This included positive attitudes and beliefs (Buisse, et al, 2001, Carrington & Robinson, 2006), professional knowledge, skills and support systems including professional development (Carrington & Robinson, 2006) and appropriate physical and curricula accommodations (Buisse et al., 2001; Rieser, 2006b).

Nonetheless, Carrington & Robinson (2006) summarized the following:

School communities that value and respect members and provide a safe learning environment for everyone to express their views, build awareness and develop

capabilities together are more likely to be inclusive. The outcome is specifically dependent on leaders facilitating teachers to engage in constructive and critical learning, and adjust their beliefs and practice to meet the needs of diverse learners within an inclusive school culture. (p. 326)

Villa and Thousand (2005) supported this statement:

Inclusive education is about embracing everyone and making a commitment to provide each student in the community, each citizen in a democracy, with the inalienable right to belong. Inclusion assumes that living and learning together benefits everyone, not just children who are labeled as having a difference...it is a belief system, not just a set of strategies. (p. 5)

The Legislation and Policies

Children who are in most need of inclusive spaces, children with special needs, are often forgotten and tend to be neglected in the education system, despite various national and international laws, legislations, policies and declarations supporting these rights. These children, like every other child, have equal rights at many different levels and, at a minimum, under a number of Canadian legislations and policies. "In each province and territory in Canada there are human rights legislation that is designed to ensure non-discriminatory treatment to all citizens who belong to categories-women and minority groups, including persons with disabilities-who have historically been disadvantaged with respect to their equal enjoyment of the benefits of society" (Roehrer Institute, 2000, p. 77).

The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) clearly reported "State Parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the

child's active participation in the community" (Article 23, p. 11). Similarly, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (1997) developed Education For All (1990), an international declaration and commitment with an effort specifically on improving quality basic education amongst children, youth and adults across the globe. From Education For All (1990) came the development and implementation of the Salamanca Statement (1994) which specifically discussed and identified the need for children, youth and adults with special needs to have a fundamental right to access inclusive education. The conference, held in Salamanca, Spain, brought together senior educational officials and administrators, policy-makers, representatives of United Nations, specialized agencies, governmental and non-governmental agencies as well as donors. Ninety two governments and twenty five international agencies assembled to reaffirm their commitment to recognizing the need to provide education for individuals with special needs in an inclusive educational environment. The Salamanca Statement (1994) clearly stated that the conference was held in an attempt to "...further the objective of Education for All (1990) by considering the fundamental policy shifts required to promote the approach of inclusive education, namely enabling schools to serve all children, particularly those with special needs" (p. iii).

The commitment of the United Nations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Education for All (1990) and the Salamanca Statement (1994) is a clear indicator of the child's right to participate in a quality, inclusive educational environment within their community and with their peers, hence improving their opportunities for equal human rights globally. Killoran, Tymon and Frempong (2007) supported this by stating "...there is a direct correlation between inclusive education and the quality of life of citizens with disabilities" (p. 82).

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) also clearly stated “...every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical handicap” (para. 15). Children with special needs are clearly protected under this charter and parents who have children with special needs who are not attending a “regular school system” are able to appeal to their provincial or territorial ministry of education for equal educational opportunities (Allen et al., 2006). In reality though, many schools have classrooms that intentionally segregate children with special needs from their typically developing peers and force them to be in discriminatory and exclusive settings, violating their fundamental rights. Under the Charter, this is clearly discrimination based on their “mental or physical handicap” but the practices go unnoticed simply because parents are unaware of their rights.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (2007) discussed children with special needs and confirmed that “...education providers have a duty to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities in order to allow them to access educational services equally, unless to do so would cause undue hardship” (para. 2). In addition, “the right to equal treatment and the duty to accommodate exists for publicly funded and privately funded early childhood pre-schools, elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities” (para. 3). Based on these statements, there is no room left to argue in support of educational environments which engage in and support exclusionary practices as it would be a human rights violation. Children with special needs have the right to be accommodated throughout their entire educational career. Furthermore, they have the right to full participation, defined by Allen et al., (2006) as

“...opportunities for individuals with special needs to go to school and participate in education experiences, as do other children and youth” (p. 8).

The difficulty lies however, in the perceptions of administrators, personnel and educators in regards to what it means to “accommodate” children with special needs, what it means to “cause undue hardship” and what is involved in “full participation.” This is open to differing opinions and the ambiguity of the terminology leaves room to argue that children with special needs are practicing their rights by attending school. Rieser (2006b) articulated that “all of us involved with education must engage in the ongoing task of changing deep-seated attitudes and discriminatory behaviour if we are to create an inclusive future in which all will benefit” (p. 164).

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2007) policies on serving children with special needs stated the following:

...principals are required to ensure that an Individual Education Plan (IEP) is developed for each exceptional student within thirty school days of the start of the student's placement. An IEP is a detailed written report describing the special educational services required by a student based on a thorough assessment of the student's strengths and needs. This is developed to assist in determining the most appropriate educational plan discussing the student's ability to learn and demonstrate learning. School boards have the discretion to develop an IEP for students who have not been formally identified as exceptional (para. 25) in order to accommodate and provide appropriate educational opportunities and support systems.

The IEP is developed upon recommendation from the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC), “...composed of at least three persons, one of whom must be a principal or

supervisory officer of the board” (para. 1). The IPRC is responsible to invite parents and students over 16 years of age to attend the meeting to discuss relevant educational background. The committee decides if the student should be identified as exceptional, defines areas of exceptionalities as mandated by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2007) and determines an appropriate placement. The IPRC must provide reasons for placement if the recommendation is in a special class and must discuss this with the parents and student over 16 years of age upon request with annual reviews. Parents have the right to “...be present at and participate in all committee discussions; be present when the committee makes its decision about identification and placement; have a representative present to speak on their behalf or otherwise support them” (para. 10). It is clearly documented “...that an IPRC placement decision cannot be implemented unless a parent has consented to the decision or has not filed a notice of appeal within the required time limit” (para. 15). Often times, parents are unaware of this protocol and despite wanting their child with special needs to be in an inclusive environment, unknowingly have their child placed in a segregated environment (Rafferty et. al., 2001).

The TDSB (2007a) acknowledged that “students have varying learning needs and may require special programs and services to reach their full potential” (para. 1) hence the development and implementation of the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC). The purpose of the SEAC is to make recommendations to the board concerning the establishment, development and delivery of special education programs and services. The committee is comprised of representatives of local associations, community representatives and trustees appointed by the board. Some are parents, who themselves, have children with special needs and make themselves available as resources for other parents, guardians, educators and the community as a whole (TDSB, 2007b, para. 2). “The TDSB and SEAC work together to protect

the rights of students with special learning needs" (TDSB, 2007c, para. 3) and define "a student with special needs is one whose behavioural, communication, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities are such that he/she is considered to need special education support" (TDSB, 2007b, para. 1). The TDSB (2007c) asserted:

...its Special Education department is committed to active and meaningful collaboration with students, parents/guardians, schools, and agencies to ensure that all students' special learning needs are met in the most inclusionary environment possible, in the most equitably-resourced programs possible. (para. 1)

The UNCRC (1989), Education for All (1990), the Salamanca Statement (1994), the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982), the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2007), the Ministry of Education (2007) and the TDSB (2007) clearly outlined their support for children with special needs in public education. Given these policies and legislations that support the inclusion of children with special needs in public education, the researcher posed the question, what are the experiences of parents with young children with special needs in public education? Three parents were interviewed, their responses were analyzed and themes were identified in this research study. Their responses are discussed and recommendations are made for further research and the practice of implementing change in the following chapters.

CHAPTER II

Methodology

Search Criteria

Purposeful sampling was used to seek parents who wished to express their views on inclusion of their children with special needs. Creswell (2005) defined purposeful sampling as “a qualitative sampling procedure in which (the) researcher intentionally selects individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon” (p. 596).

Initially, four participants were to be recruited for this study and were to be involved in one open ended interview. The questions asked in the one-on-one interviews pertained to the participant’s perspectives and experiences with their children with an identified special need in a public school setting.

The adult participants should have varied in age, socioeconomic level, culture, language, and immigration status. Their child however, was between the ages of 4-10 years, in kindergarten, grade one or grade two in public education in the Toronto/GTA area. This was done in an attempt to gain insight into the experiences of a diverse group of participants.

The parents had to be able to communicate in English in order to complete the interview or have an interpreter available to translate for the researcher. In order to conduct this research study ethically, the first four parents who agreed to be participants in this study were asked to volunteer. Participants identified that they met this criteria by providing verbal confirmation. Information was gathered to determine whether children with special needs face barriers when entering the educational system. Additionally, if policies and the implementation of these policies are used to include or exclude children with special needs was explored.

Search Strategy

A recruitment flyer was developed and distributed to staff at the Ryerson University Early Learning Centre, Gerrard Resource Centre and Community Living Toronto. The flyer provided a brief description of the study, and requested their participation by contacting the researcher. Follow-up phone calls were conducted after a two week period for a total of three months. One parent initiated contact via email and expressed a keen interest in being a participant. She was interviewed as the first participant. A second parent initiated contact via telephone and expressed an interest in participating however, when he realized that the interview would be audio recorded, he was unsure about participating and asked to re-confirm within a few days. There was no phone call received for a period of one week. Contact was initiated and a voice message was left requesting him to return the call if he was still interested in participating. There was no return call received, therefore, no further contact was pursued with this parent.

Due to a lack of responses from potential participants from the above contacts, another request was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee at Ryerson University for approval to approach other organizations to assist with recruiting participants. Family Alliance Ontario, Ontario Coalition for Inclusive Education and Autism Ontario were added to the list. These organizations were telephoned and inquiries were made about their interest in assisting with the recruitment of participants. Representatives from the above organizations requested further information which was followed up with an email containing the same recruitment flyer. Two weeks later, with no contact from the organizations, a follow up via telephone was initiated. Representatives from the organizations reported they had been unsuccessful in assisting with recruiting participants. Representatives from all three organizations asked to have no further contact with the researcher and there was no follow up as a result.

The Down Syndrome Society of Toronto and the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) for the TDSB were both contacted via telephone for the purpose of assisting in recruiting participants. Representatives from the Down Syndrome Society stated they were not interested in supporting with the recruitment of participants. There was no further contact as a result. A telephone call with a representative from SEAC stated he would discuss the researcher's proposal to other parents on the committee and requested a follow up phone call in a few days. A follow up telephone call was initiated where the representative reported that the parents he contacted had already been involved in similar research over a number of years and were not interested in pursuing another project at that time. No further contact was pursued as a result.

Two other participants were recruited through a convenience sampling (Creswell, 2005), known to the researcher through personal and/or professional contacts. They were also given the same recruitment flyer and asked if they wished to participate in the research study and agreed. Consent forms were handed to all three participants. Participants were asked to thoroughly review the information provided and were encouraged to ask questions as necessary. All participants willingly agreed to be interviewed and were aware of the questions being asked in the interview prior to as they were clearly stated on the consent forms. The interview questions were as follows:

1. Can you tell me about your child? Please comment on their strengths and areas that you feel make your child unique.
2. How are children with special needs viewed in your culture?
3. What has been your experience with your child throughout their earlier years in social settings with other children their age?

4. What has been your experience with your child in the education/school system?
5. Please explain the types of supports that your child has received since they started school.
6. Please explain the supports you feel the school has provided for you.
7. As a parent, what role do you want to play while your child is in a public school?

Participants were reminded at the beginning of each interview that they may terminate at any point, as well, the researcher made a conscious effort to ascertain any discomfort by the participants throughout the interviews. Upon completion of the first interviews, it was apparent that there were a number of questions that emerged from the information provided. All participants were approached for a second interview via telephone as a substitute for a sample of four parent participants, which was unattainable. All participants agreed to be interviewed and audio recorded a second time.

During the second interviews, the questions varied for each participant as the purpose was for the researcher to expand on information specified during the first interviews. Given the unique experiences of each participant and their child with the education system, it was difficult to produce a standard set of questions that would be applicable to all parents. The researcher developed the following questions based on information revealed during the first interview:

1. Are there any updates about your child's experiences at school?
2. How do you feel the IEP is working for your child?
3. Is there anything about the IEP that you agree or disagree with?
4. What kinds of supports are available for your child at school?
5. Do you feel that the way the teacher intervened with your child was appropriate?
6. Has the school attempted to have any accommodations or modifications put into place for your child?

7. What is your concern for your child with their schooling for next year?
8. Do you have any ideas around how the school could better support your child?
9. What is your recommendation for the school based on your experiences?

Validity and reliability (Creswell, 2005) was attained through the participants examining the transcripts and having the option of editing and/or deleting any information they chose. The first participant reviewed both transcripts over the course of a few weeks, made revisions and requested that the previous transcripts be destroyed. She also requested to see the transcripts after being revised to ensure she was in agreement with the content. The other two participants stated they were not interested in reviewing, revising or deleting any information in the transcripts and agreed to submit the transcripts in their original format.

Inter rater reliability (Creswell, 2005) was attained through a colleague reviewing the transcripts and developing themes for the interviews. There was a consensus on the themes and although the terminology used to describe the themes was slightly different, the ideas were consistent with the researcher's analysis.

Results

As stated earlier, three participants agreed to conduct two one on one interviews. For the purpose of this paper, the parents will be given pseudonyms to respect confidentiality and to distinguish between their experiences. The information presented in the chart below was self-identified by the participants during the interview. Given that the researcher attempted to access a diverse population to interview for this research, it was felt that the information provided in the chart was pertinent to this study. Although the participants were diverse, they were all self-reportedly middle class Canadian families, all with Canadian post-secondary educational qualification and had English as their first spoken language.

Participant's Demographics

Family Constellation	Grade	Identified Special Need	Class Placement	Self-identified family background
Two parent family Mrs. Stamos	1	Diagnosis ADHD	Segregated classroom	Greek, Canadian
Single mother Mrs. Belle	1	Diagnosis Hypotonia	Functional integration	French, Native, Canadian
Two parent family Mrs. Sucre	SK	Unidentified speech difficulties	Pull-outs	Spanish, Vietnamese, Canadian

Data Analysis

While reviewing the transcripts several times, it was evident a number of topics, words and phrases were used and discussed repeatedly by the participants. The transcripts were thematically analyzed, described by Creswell (2005) as an "...exclusive discussion about the major themes that arise from analyzing a qualitative database. Often this approach uses extensive quotes and rich details to support the themes" (p. 266). The researcher coded the transcripts, described by Creswell (2005) as "...the process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and broad themes into the data" (p. 237). He further described that the purpose of coding is to "...make sense out of text data, divide it into text or image segments,

label the segments with codes, examine the codes for overlap and redundancy, and collapse these codes into broad themes” (p. 237). Themes were identified and categorized throughout the transcripts based on participants’ responses. A total of nine themes emerged throughout the process. Creswell (2005) stated “describing and developing themes from the data consists of answering the major research questions and forming an in-depth understanding of the central phenomenon through description and thematic development” (p. 241).

CHAPTER III

Presentation of Data

Experiencing Exclusion

This research study found that the children with special needs in this case study experienced exclusion often and it took form in the following ways.

The Medical Model

This theme is characterized by references made to a diagnosis by professionals in the medical field including Physicians, Psychologists, Occupational Therapists, Speech Therapists, Speech Pathologists and Physiotherapists. Participants disclosed having their children undergo assessments based on their presenting behaviours and/or needs upon the recommendation of the school. As a result, medical diagnosis and labels such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Hypotonia, Autism, Learning Disabled, Cognitively Impaired, Anxiety, Disability and Mentally Challenged were commonly referred to. Furthermore, all participants focused on the diagnosis and intervention of professionals to assist with accessing appropriate educational services for their child.

Mrs. Belle stated, for example, that the school personnel were:

...verbally supportive with me and telling me what they could do to ensure that his safety needs were met and his learning needs were met, and of course, I had to provide them with all of the documentation from all of his doctors and I had to go back for more consultation to satisfy the school that he was a special needs child.

This statement is reflective of her need to convince the school with medical documentation that her child did in fact have a special need in order to provide appropriate accommodations for him.

Mrs. Sucre, who is clear that her son is having difficulties with his speech and has only just begun to have medical professionals involved has had similar experiences. She reported:

One of the teachers said so. His homeroom teacher, his original teacher and a lot of the speech pathologists said that (hearing tests) is an option. Again, if that isn't the problem, at least we can actually take that off the list and say that that's not the problem. As long as if it is tested and we say and the test shows that the hearing is not a problem, at least we can cross that off the list and say that's not the cause of it. So they said it wouldn't be a bad idea.

She acknowledged that she has her son undergo a number of medical examinations to determine what his special need is. There seemed to be an effort towards having a special need identified.

Mrs. Sucre appeared to be following through with the school's recommendation despite the fact that it was not a medical professional suggesting these batteries of tests, rather educational staff.

Mrs. Stamos stated:

...the principal of the school was trying to send (child's name) to the Kindergarten

Intervention Program (KIP). They didn't want him in the class. They were telling us that they did not have the staff or the support. To get the support we had to get him labeled.

We thought, two and a half, three years old? That's too young to get assessed or to get a child labeled. So we left. It was our choice to leave from that school.

She discussed her experience with the school principal who reportedly was trying to convince the family to have their child assessed at a local hospital in order to accommodate his special need at school. This parent refused to have her child assessed and decided to change schools because the recommendation was against her fundamental belief system.

Clearly, these parents have identified the school's need for families with children with special needs to have medical professionals diagnose and provide documentation in order to receive additional supports and/or accommodations at school. It seems unwarranted that personnel at an educational setting make recommendations for medical assessments, especially given the mandate of the school board to educate, not label and medicate.

Normal and Abnormal Contrast

This is characterized by references made to their child's behaviours and the struggle with their child being described as normal, abnormal and/or different. Throughout the interviews, parents identified situations where their child has been emphasized as existing solely based on their limitations associated with their special need. The child should be viewed as an individual with a personality and characteristics that make them unique; it just so happens that this child also has a special need. Examples included are identified behaviours that are not considered normal, segregation at school, exclusion based on their special need, medicalized terminology to describe their children, having one to one workers at school, family members treating their children differently, discussing other children and describing them as normal but not their own child and being disadvantaged based on their special need. Parents seemed to struggle with not only societal biases but also the labeling and identification of their child as different, hence being treated differently in school by their teachers and peers, at home by family and friends and at times, even themselves.

Mrs. Belle said:

I have already mentioned it a couple of times, to me right now, with me working with him and working within the school, it's just the number one thing that we hope for as parents of children who have special needs or disabilities, is the whole concept of

inclusion. It is important for them to have just as many advantages as all the other students do and they are already at a disadvantage already because of their disability but I don't think it is necessary that we have to treat them that much differently than other children and I think we are also setting up by role modeling to other children. It's not teaching them properly how to engage and encounter any type of interaction with children with special needs, if that makes any sense.

She asserted that her child is different and emphasized that her child should have as many advantages as other children however continues by stating that they should not be treated "that much differently" as opposed to saying they shouldn't be treated differently at all. This exemplifies the struggle between knowing that her child has a special need and believing that he should have the same opportunities as other children however her experiences have indicated differently to her. Although she articulated that her child should have equal opportunities, her statement indicates that her beliefs may be otherwise.

Mrs. Stamos identified that her son is considered to be a normal boy according to her cultural background and her family. She declared that boys are supposed to be active and aggressive and genuinely disagreed that her son should have been diagnosed and recommended medication. She exemplified this when she states "well, like I said, in our culture (child's name) is considered normal. To medicate a normal child or an average child, like why? Why fix something that's not broken?" When discussing the recommendation that her son be medicated based on the diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, again she asserted with great conviction "...my husband and I have been talking back and forth with the medication. At first, it was no. No. Our gut reaction, our first reaction would be no." She acknowledged struggling with the process of having to assess, diagnose and medicate her son based on the school's

recommendation and the behaviours he was presented at school. Her cultural upbringing is Greek and is clearly in conflict with the medical interpretation of her son and she made a concentrated effort to address this throughout the interview.

Mrs. Belle discussed the segregation of all children with special needs in her child's class, with an educational assistant present, and stressed that:

It is just a set up. It just allows them to see that they (children with special needs) are different. It allows everybody else to see that they are different and the fact that there are so many issues with all of them is troubling as well because I think that with my son comparable to a learning disability, comparable to an autistic child and then a behavioural child, their needs are so tremendously different that they're not being addressed and so they sort of, they are all learning from each other and again it's not a very healthy form of developmental learning.

She affirmed that in her experience, although children with special needs are physically in the same room as their typically developing peers, they are excluded and all programming is implemented independently, hence reaffirming functional integration. Despite having various developmental and cognitive needs, they are amalgamated based on the fact that they all have a special need. Accommodations are not based on individual differences, rather on the collective label of being different.

School Board Bureaucracies

This is characterized by parents having to participate in meetings for various reasons; child being rejected by a number of schools, child being suspended from school, having assessments completed, providing assessments and other documentation to the school in order to

have accommodations and having less direct contact with the teacher in comparison to the educational assistants and other professionals.

This is exemplified when Mrs. Belle stated:

His teacher hasn't had any direct contact with him. When I go in for parent teacher interviews, it's not his teacher that provides me with the information, it's his EA that provides me with the information so he has had no involvement directly with the classroom teacher except for during circle time, first thing in the morning and then after that he would be taken away, in the same classroom, but taken away from the group and the teacher and whatever she is teaching and be directly with his EA.

She discussed her experiences of having the educational assistant as the conveyor of information during parent teacher nights at school given that her child spends the entire day with his one to one worker. This child has very limited contact with his teacher, which evokes the question of the quality of education that is provided to children with special needs.

Mrs. Stamos discussed her frustration with the recommendation of having her child assessed and the number of meetings that resulted. She said:

You know, going through an IEP, going through IPRC's, getting your child labeled, I mean, whether your child has a problem or not, it's not a... it's not something that a parent would like to do, especially going through all these meetings. I mean, can you imagine if I were working? I mean, the blessing here is that I wasn't working, and I was able to go, to go and prepare for these meetings...

Mrs. Sucre concurred that the expectations the school had in regards to meetings was difficult to manage with her career and other commitments. She said:

There has been discussion about meeting and my only regret is that it is very difficult for me to meet a lot of the times. I do want some more support. I don't know what support can be provided for me, what type of help we can get him in the school or what type of more help I can get him outside of the school, but it is really hard for me to say because although I do want to be there for my son, it's really hard because I am working 12 hours a day.

She explained how she struggled to cope with her professional life while she attempted to meet the expectations of the school in order to help her child have his educational needs met.

All parents identified requests from the school board for them to participate in meetings, which resulted in difficulties with managing schedules and balancing a professional and personal life.

Systems Language

This is characterized by the parent's use of language and seeming to be fluent in the language of the school board and the terminology related to healthcare professionals working with their children. The parents continuously made reference to legislation and policies, diagnoses and used acronyms and jargon throughout the interviews as though it was everyday language. This included references made to IEP's, IPRC's, JK, SK, EA's Section 305, mainstream/regular/ segregated classroom, percentile, diagnosis, pulled-out, one to one worker, special needs classroom, fine/gross motor skills, Safe School's Act, learning/physical disabilities as the foremost ideas. The researcher, being a healthcare professional working closely with a school board in the GTA, required clarification at several points. The parents however, were clear about what they were referred to and articulated themselves clearly and without hesitation.

Mrs. Stamos made reference to the KIP program and when the researcher asked for clarification, she responded "it's called the Kindergarten Intervention Program. It's for, I guess,

children with behavioural issues or problems that they put in these programs and it's a smaller class setting, which I know (child's name) is good in a smaller class setting." Although she initially used an acronym, she was aware that K.I.P. is the Kindergarten Intervention Program and was able to clarify the mandate of the program.

Mrs. Belle commented that "he couldn't open up containers out of his lunch bag, just couldn't manipulate those fine motor tasks where he is still classified as delayed. He is only in the twelfth percentile, but for his age now, but he has improved extremely in that area." When asked to clarify what she meant by the twelfth percentile, she explained that:

Out of every 100 children he would fall in the position of the twelfth child as far as the tests and assessments were concerned. So fifty percent or better is normal range, higher than that is above average and so that would put my son in less than a quarter, in a low range, in a low percentile. So he is twelfth now, but in his kindergarten grades he was third percentile.

Mrs. Belle referred to testing completed by professionals and spoke as though it is language used daily. She confidently explained the range her son fell under and gave details about the progress he made since the previous year.

Similarly, Mrs. Sucre discussed her child's Individual Education Plan (IEP) and when asked to clarify what the IEP entailed, she explained:

Basically, they were saying in the plan, I mean they are going to look at his strengths, at his weaknesses and use that information to help them help him, so if they are noticing that he needs certain prompts or accommodations they will put that into place with this plan....

Undoubtedly, these parents became familiarized with the language and have an obvious knowledge base uncommon to parents who have had less contact with their child's school and the formalities associated with having a child with a special need in public education.

Child's Behaviours

This theme is initially characterized by parents who discussed positive characteristics and attributes about their children yet they seemed to quickly delve into discussing their child's negative behaviours. It was apparent that there were far more criticisms than strengths about their child's behaviours. Undoubtedly, all parents seemed to have a vested interest in their child's rearing but also seemed conflicted only when they discussed behaviours and interactions at school.

When asked to describe what she felt is unique about her child and his strengths, Mrs. Stamos stated:

He's a very active boy, very smart, very funny, bright, and I don't know what else to say about him (laugh), I guess with his hyperactivity that he has, he can get on your nerves. He does here at home and I know that he's pretty challenging to some staff members, sometimes at daycare and um, now at with the new school... we don't know yet. It's about his third or fourth school that he's gone to...fourth school.

Although she started by describing positive attributes, she continued by commenting that she did not know what else to say about him. She then, started to discuss his difficulties at school and at home, without being prompted.

Mrs. Belle stated:

My son is 6 years old. His name is (child's name). He is in grade one at... the local public school. What makes him unique? I don't know what makes him unique. He is a great little guy. Do you want me to talk about the special needs he has?

She did not mention any positive characteristics except generally complimented him as being 'a great little guy.' She then asked permission to discuss his special need. When asked to discuss his strengths again, she continued with:

He is very, very affectionate. He has actually been classified as having Autistic tendencies, though he is not Autistic. He is much too social to be diagnosed with Autism but he has a lot of those types of characteristics, repetition, memory and arm flapping behaviours and anxiety provoking things and he is in the classroom with an EA to assist him with gross motor skills. He is quite delayed in those areas as a result of hypotonia.

Mrs. Belle identified a few of his strengths and focused in on his difficulties without being asked or prompted again.

Mrs. Sucre, when asked the same question, stated:

(Child's name) is a very happy child. He loves to play. He does talk a lot, the only thing is that he likes to play and he likes to talk a lot but the only problem that I would say, I know you said to talk about the strengths, but there is a problem in terms of his speech. In terms of his strengths, he loves to socialize with others. He is very good with other kids. We have a huge family. I have got a lot of nieces and nephews and at family parties and when I have little cousins coming over, he is really good at playing with them so he loves to socialize. He loves to talk so, he also loves to dance. He is very active in terms of like, when he does play with other kids, he brings other kids into play if he sees they are not playing, so he is really engaged in his play, which I think is a really strong strength.

She seemed to struggle with focusing on his strengths and qualities that make him unique. This parent however, appeared to recognize that she focused on his difficulties and immediately guided the conversation back to his strengths.

The parents all appeared to immediately disclose behaviours associated with their child's special need as though it is their utmost defining characteristic. Although asked to discuss unique characteristics, there was an emphasis on the child's struggles at school and in the home. This was perhaps guided by the researchers influence given that the flyer used to recruit participants and the title of the study is specifically geared towards parents who have children with special needs. It was however, noteworthy to mention that it seemed as though the parents themselves wanted to either immediately discuss their concerns or they had a difficult time with identifying their child's strengths.

Socialization

This is exemplified when all parents identified their child's strengths. All parents stated that their child is a pleasure to be with, looked forward to having social time, enjoyed opportunities to play with and engage with their peers.

Mrs. Stamos stated:

So my child likes kids, likes people. He just doesn't know how to play with them. So how's he going to learn the social skills to play with other children and to share with the other children when there's only one or no one in the classroom?

She illustrated her frustration with her child being in a segregated classroom for children with special needs, which she referred to as children with behavioural difficulties. She contended that her child cannot learn the social skills he needs in order to engage more appropriately with peers when he has only one other student in his class.

Mrs. Belle said "I believe he is a very social boy. He is very outgoing and he's very, in his mind, he believes he is probably out there just wanting to be nice to everybody and make friends." She discussed how her child genuinely enjoys being with people and wants to belong to a peer group. This child is in a functional segregated classroom and has an educational assistant he spends the entire day at school with, which impacts the amount of time he is able to spend with peers outside of supervised time.

Mrs. Sucre confirmed:

In terms of his strengths, he loves to socialize with others. He is very good with other kids. We have a huge family. I have a lot of nieces and nephews and at family parties and when I have little cousins coming over he is really good at playing with them so he loves to socialize, he loves to talk so he loves to dance.

These are all positive attributes that display how sociable the children in this study are and their need to want to be in positive relationships with other children. These parents identified socialization as an area of strength for their children however they are either segregated, pulled out or excluded from opportunities with their peer group. They argued, how will their children develop age appropriate social skills and the ability to interact with same aged peers unless there is direct contact or exposure to an accepting environment? Their special needs don't warrant isolation, rather opportunities for socialization to enhance acceptance.

Victimization

This is categorized when parents identified negative feelings and experiences of their children being discriminated against in comparison to other children at school. Specific examples included being suspended, being pulled out of mainstream classrooms and programming, being academically and socially excluded and being bullied and teased by other

children. Mrs. Stamos, whose son is diagnosed with ADHD, explained how her son is victimized by being suspended and excluded from school altogether. She said:

He went to the school and all of a sudden we're getting expulsions or suspensions and I kick myself for that, saying I should have followed my gut. I should have waited a year or two to make sure (child's name) is ready for school. We should have just put him in a daycare like we said...they're more sympathetic to him, than send him to a school that did not want to deal with his behaviours or his issues.

She struggled with having her child suspended on a number of occasions because of behaviours he displayed as a result of his inability to stay focused and follow the expectations his teachers had for him in a mainstream classroom. There were no accommodations in place for him, rather he was suspended a number of times until he had an IPRC and an IEP, which ultimately resulted in him being excluded and put into a segregated classroom.

Mrs. Belle compared the difference between how she feels her child is perceived by family members and people that don't know her son. She commented "so from a family perspective it is very supportive and always checking in and making sure he is getting what he needs. From a community perspective, it is always 'that boy.' He doesn't get treated the same as other children." She explained her experiences of how her family is able to accept her son despite his differences however, strangers seem to view him and treat him differently, as though he is imperfect.

Mrs. Sucre described how she had to strategize with the school to have her niece in the same classroom with her son given his difficulties with speech and communication. She explained:

My niece, she is very good at telling me how the day goes too, so she will mention that the kids, when they are playing, they will be like, 'what, I don't understand him' and so the teasing, there are some loud comments about him not speaking clearly and teasing him, so she steps in there and she tells them, well he is saying this and saying that, so she is there to defend him and basically speak on his behalf, so she really understands him in that way.

Mrs. Sucre continued with "...I was very comfortable with the fact that my niece was in the same class as him because again, I was comfortable with her being there because she is always there protecting him, defending him." A parent should trust that their child is going to be safe at school and does not need another child to protect or defend them. The fact that this mother speaks of this is a strong indicator that he is victimized and treated unjustly by his peers.

Active Segregation

This is exemplified by parents discussing their experiences with their child's school and having actual examples of when and how their child was excluded in many ways. This included having to have their child assessed, diagnosed and possibly medicated before returning to school. It also involved suspensions, expulsions, segregated classrooms, rejection from mainstream classrooms, one to one workers, pull outs, limited contact with their teacher and other schools rejecting and refusing admission. It also entailed contact with superintendents of the school board, lawyers and the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

Mrs. Stamos described the current classroom her child is in and her desire to see her son included in a mainstream classroom. She explained:

Yes, there is only six kids now in this class and I did go last week to speak with the teacher. And I was glad to hear that he said to me that (child's name) didn't have the

behaviours that the other children had, to where they'd be yelling and screaming and kicking and cursing, but he could see how a teacher in a regular class can get frustrated with him because he doesn't sit. So, in a way, I was happy to hear that but I'm not thrilled that he's in a behaviour class. That I'm not thrilled with... I, I, I wished that he'd be in a regular class.

Her preference for an inclusive learning environment for her son is clearly articulated.

Mrs. Sucre contemplated:

I'm not 100% sure how I feel about him being pulled out. I mean I'm half and half. I know it will benefit him but again I just wish he could socialize with the other kids and that way, the other kids would be more aware of how he would be.

She identified that she sees the benefits of having her child pulled out of mainstream programming in order to receive additional supports however attested that her son is excluded socially and this hinders successful inclusion in the social community at school. This is supported by her stating that she wished other children would be more aware of how her child is, resulting in transformed attitudes towards children with special needs in, not only school, but society as a whole.

Mrs. Belle discussed the type of educational setting her child was in and felt her child had appropriate accommodations initially however:

In his classroom all of the special needs children in his grade are all in the same classroom and so within that classroom, so he is not segregated into his own special needs classroom, but within his classroom all the special needs kids sit together and all the special needs kids do their own programs and activities together exclusive of the rest

of the classroom with their assistant, their one to one workers, well it is not one to one anymore, I think it is 6 to one within (child's name) group.

Mrs. Belle described how, although her child is in a mainstream classroom, he is excluded from his peers during academics and alternative programming. All children with special needs sit separated from their peers but are seated together with their educational assistant. She further described:

When you first go into the classroom, the desks are all in rows and the teacher, of course, teaches from the front. Her desk is at the back and at the far side of the classroom.

Under where the windows would be, is a round table, a large round table area with a couple of small desks, and that's where my son and the other students (with special needs) sit.

Even the physical layout of the classroom is highly suggestive of exclusionary practices. In this particular environment, children with special needs are functionally integrated yet remain segregated from their peers.

Parent's Feelings

This is characterized by parents who described how their experiences with various schools have impacted their emotions. They articulated feeling that teachers and school personnel don't care about their children and express feeling frustrated with IEP's/IPRC's and other meetings. They all conveyed being unhappy about their children being excluded in segregated classrooms and during periods of pull outs. All parents identified that their children have been bullied and teased by their peers and that they disliked the social isolation their children feel as a result. They acknowledged wanting their children to be treated the same as their peers, not differently based solely on their special needs.

Mrs. Sucre articulated that:

There are a bunch of mixed feelings. A part of me is wanting him to be pulled out to get help from the teacher because at least I know there is someone there helping him with his speech and you know the things that he needs help on. But a part of me doesn't like it because he is not in with the rest of the kids, so you know he is that , you know, myself, I would hate to be pulled out.

Mrs. Stamos said:

Because I know for senior, for junior kindergarten, when he did get suspended, I decided, my husband and I decided to just send him to daycare and not send him back to school.

Because my fear was that this would happen again and already we were writing letters between the principal and I, bashing each other, you know, sending copies to lawyers and superintendents; the highest people we could find in the school board.

Mrs. Stamos explained how she tried to advocate for her son to attend school as he was suspended on a number of occasions. She was advised to have him on home instruction for three hours per week until his IPRC meeting. She claimed "he did not get it. Uh, when I called for it (home instruction) they told me they haven't been able to find a teacher. So (child's name) was without a teacher of this three hours of instruction a week." When asked by the researcher how she understood this, she explained "they didn't want him in the school regarding the above. They just didn't want him in there." Mrs. Stamos simply made the connection between her child's behaviours, which resulted in suspensions, which in turn, resulted in him being completely denied an education. Attempts to advocate for him resulted in negative feelings and interactions with the principal and ultimately impacted his educational options.

Mrs. Belle supported this and asserted:

I think it is paramount that all parents are involved in their children's learning. It is important to be on the same page as the educators. It is important to know what the school is providing for them. I think it is important for the child to see that everybody is sort of working together for best interests and best needs and when the parents are involved and in line, they can assure that that's happening and the child sees them involved and sees that they are showing an interest.

She articulated that it is crucial for parents and school board personnel to work together in order to help the child, seemingly from an educational and social standpoint. In her mind, this demonstrated cohesion between adult care givers, hence promoting and modeling inclusion to children in the education system, which in turn can initiate societal change.

When interviewing parents with children with special needs in the early years, nine themes emerged from the preliminary thematic analysis. When analyzing the data, certain practices drew attention simply because they were examples of deliberate exclusion in public education.

Normal versus Abnormal

This is exemplified by Mrs. Belle when she discussed experiences of her child being excluded in the educational setting based on his special need. She explained:

I don't remember which grade it was, but yes, the collective agreement hadn't been reached as of yet and there was a possibility of a province wide strike of educational assistants and the school that my son is at, felt it necessary to take preventative measures in case there was a walk out within that next two week period and so their way of handling the situation, and I don't know this may have been province wide, but I don't know, but my school, I do know, is the way that they were going to manage that situation

is, I received a letter that was sent home that informed me that these EA's may be going on strike and if that was to happen, because at that time it was even more of a safety situation for my son, that the only way that he would be able to remain in the classroom is if I was to go in to the classroom with him in the absence of the EA.

Mrs. Belle explained how her son was possibly going to be excluded from attending school because his educational assistant may have been on strike. She further clarified:

So I had two options, either go to class with him all day long and meet the needs that the EA did, or not send him to school. I would have to keep him at home. Myself and a number of other parents who were involved at that situation were completely outraged at that fact that there wasn't support available and that they would have to be excluded like that. If the teachers went on strike then the whole school is out, but suddenly again, our children are just being singled out as being, and yes, they are different. We all know that they are different but there are so many different ways I think to manage the situation.

Mrs. Belle commented that her son is consistently being identified as being different and the school reinforced that her son is incapable of being present in the school unless his educational assistant is present. The argument she made is that all other children are able to attend school however her son is unable based on the fact that he is identified with a special need.

Mrs. Sucre discussed how she feels her child is deliberately treated differently in a social setting, amongst his peers and their families. She explained:

What I have experienced about other families...when they find out that there is a disability they're a lot more cautious of their children playing with him or being involved with him because it is almost like they think it is contagious or something. You know, if they hang out with him, they are going to catch something. That's my experience, and he

comes home and he will say... that he says that he knows that he is different and he, not really bullying, but he gets picked on a little bit because of his differences.

She discussed the stigma attached to a child with a special need from a social standpoint and claims that her child is treated differently based on this. Parents of typically developing peers hesitated to have their children interact with the participant's son for a fear of their child contracting that special need. Furthermore, she commented that typically developing peers harassed him but quickly minimized the statement when she qualified it as "picked on a little".

Mrs. Stamos discussed the interpersonal difficulties her child is having and the impact that negative interactions at school had on his self esteem. She stated:

...I do believe that a lot of his struggle now and his frustration comes from knowing he's different and a lot of his misunderstanding and lack of knowledge knowing he's different comes for the experience the school has given him, if that makes sense.

She stated that her child is struggling with being identified and treated differently which resulted in low self esteem and frustration at school. Mrs. Stamos earlier explained how her son had been suspended from school on a number of occasions and was recommended he be medicated for a medical diagnosis of ADHD. Failure to comply with the expectations of different medical professionals resulted in behaviours that had him expelled and recommendations made for home schooling. This is an example of exclusion based on a medical model and diagnosis. Mrs. Stamos explained how these experiences have had a detrimental impact on her child.

Fear and Victimization

Mrs. Stamos expressed fear for her son's future based on a number of factors. She commented:

Whether he's black, white, green, yellow, Autistic, ADD or language disability, I find that they are taking advantage of this. I find that they are taking advantage of a lot of parents. Parents that don't know the language, parents that just came into the country and too many children are getting kicked out. And these are the children that are going to be statistics 5 to 10 years from now. They're going to be shooting and robbing people on the street and it's not their fault, and it won't be the parent's fault. To me it all starts with the school system. You're kicking them out. You're the first person that's kicking them out and telling them that they're not wanted because they're different.

Mrs. Stamos discussed her concerns about families becoming victims to the education system simply by being unaware of their rights and responsibilities. She implied that immigrant and minority language families may be targeted as well and suggested that she may have had knowledge of families that she felt have been oppressed in such situations. She discussed her child's future and the future of society as a whole. She suggested children who are being suspended and expelled from schools become victims to a larger system that has rejected them and ultimately gave them the message that they are undeserving of success. Her comments further described her fear about her son's future. She discussed fearing that these children, including her son, will become a statistic and perhaps become involved in criminal activities. She blamed this on the discriminatory practices inflicted upon children with special needs and clearly said that the parents will not be liable for the school board's decision for abandoning them.

Mrs. Sucre commented:

I know it (segregated classroom) will benefit him, but again, I just wish he could socialize with the other kids and that way the other kids would be more aware of how he

would be. They (school personnel) probably know best, but I'm thinking it's just really hard because I want him to be in with the other kids so he doesn't feel like he is different. She stated that the supports the school has provided for her son had been beneficial however she struggled with having her son excluded socially. She commented about the school board knowing best, seemingly doubting her knowledge and experiences as a parent and her ability to make decisions in the best interest of her son. Given that her son is in a segregated classroom, opportunities for socialization are limited, hence having affected his ability to form relationships with his peers. Mrs. Sucre expressed that typically developing peers don't necessarily benefit from the exclusion of children with special needs. She commented that the other children will be unaware of how her son would be and suggested that there will be no progression towards the acceptance of children with special needs in public education.

During the second interview with Mrs. Belle, she said:

Overall there haven't been any major situations to report. It is all basically the same sort of stuff that happens every day. Some basic bullying from the behavioural kids and being left out in the playground...sort of the same stuff that we talked about the last time.

She reported that her son continues to experience bullying and social exclusion and appeared to minimize the importance by qualifying the experience when she used the phrase 'any major situations.' It is presented as though they are every day occurrences and the impact on him is lessened as a result. Interestingly, this child had experiences of exclusion and victimization from the school, from typically developing peers and from other children with special needs.

Systems

Parents experience deliberate and systemic exclusion within the systems context. Mrs. Sucre commented that:

If it were up to me and my situation, then I would love to take more time off work and not have to work as much as I do, so that I can go into the school and meet with the teachers, but I mean, the situation that I am in does not allow me to do that and as a mother, I want to be more involved. I want to find out what it is that is wrong and how I can help him and what support I can do but I am not just quite sure how to do it all.

Mrs. Sucre identified that she struggled with managing her professional responsibilities and personal life while still feeling unable to support her child. Her comments reflected that she strives to make herself available to meet with teachers however other obligations have interfered with the expectations of the school. This caused her tension and uncertainty and she questioned how to cope with it all.

Mrs. Stamos stated:

...he was trying to show her (educational assistant) something and he ended up poking her in the eye with it (a pencil) which he got expelled for that under Section 305. So from there, we had to, our backs were up against the wall. We had no other choice but to put him into a K.I.P (Kindergarten Intervention Program) program. I didn't want that program.

She claimed that her son accidentally poked an educational assistant in the eye and the incident was misinterpreted as intentional. Her son was expelled as a result and was given the choice of being home schooled or the K.I.P. program. At the time of the incident, her son already had a few prior incidents that resulted in suspensions. Mrs. Stamos identified feeling as though she had no other option but to register him in the K.I.P program, otherwise he would not be in academic programming at all. She clearly stated that she did not want him in that program, however felt she had no other choice.

Mrs. Stamos recommended:

If more children now are being diagnosed then put in classes for these children. You know, not a behavioural class. Make a specific class for ADD or ADHD. Have a specific class for the Autistic children. Don't just throw them in the classroom and say well, they all got learning disabilities or they have social disabilities or whatever disabilities they've come up with right now. You know...if more kids now are being diagnosed with ADHD have a classroom with kids just with ADHD and a teacher that knows how to deal with it.

She articulated her difficulties with the school and the amalgamation of all children with special needs into one classroom, regardless of their diversity. She suggested that the labeling and diagnosing of children results in segregation and the schools seemed to use this information to exclude children with special needs into a classroom together, but separate from their typically developing peers. Mrs. Stamos argued that the schools should be accountable for having teachers that are appropriately trained and have the knowledge base to teach all children.

Summary of Results

Parents revealed that they are excluded when they are informed that completing assessments and providing documentation by varied health care professionals is mandatory in order to have accommodations put into practice. They experience exclusion when their typically developing peers are sitting in the same classroom yet they are not encouraged to interact with each other. They are teased and bullied during recess times, segregated during academic instruction and left alone to eat lunch. They are excluded from attending school trips unless there is additional staff and/or parent support available. They are denied an education when their educational assistants and/or one to one workers are absent and are asked to stay home or attend

school with a parent. Similarly, parents of children with special needs are ignored by the school board when they request that their child be treated with respect and equity. Parents experience exclusion when they must attend meetings at the school related to their child's special needs and must do so while managing a personal and professional career. Parents are excluded when they must educate themselves with relevant policies, procedures and legislations related to the education system in order to become their child's advocate. Parents and children are excluded from public education when they compared to "normal" people and expected to function within the existing educational system with minimal flexibility.

Unfortunately, this research study found that children with special needs experience far more exclusion than inclusion in public education. Despite it being their right to access quality, inclusive educational experiences with appropriate in-class supports and accommodations, children continue to be marginalized.

CHAPTER IV

Discussion and Recommendations

Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to explore the experiences of parents with children with special needs in public education. Several themes emerged from the research including the medical model, normal and abnormal contrast, school board bureaucracies, systems language, child's behaviours, socialization, victimization, active segregation and parent's feelings. Key findings were normal versus abnormal, fear and victimization and systems language. The findings were supported by existing research on children with special needs in several ways.

Normal versus Abnormal

Existing literature on parent's perspectives supported the key finding of normal versus abnormal contrast. Similarities coincide with Rieser's (2006a) discussion of the medical model in comparison to the social model. He contended that the medical model dominates within society's structure based on historical perspectives and practices that views people with special needs as incomplete and requiring medical intervention. This was evident in this research study where parents identified the need to have their children assessed by professionals outside the education system. The children in this study were excluded in public education based on Rieser's (2006b) medical model which states that people with special needs must fit within an existing structure.

One parent struggled with the recommendation that she medicate her child based on a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Another parent identified the need to provide documentation from medical professionals that supported a diagnosis of Hypotonia, in order to access accommodations and additional supports for her child at school. She also had a

number assessments completed by a number of different professionals including occupational therapy and physiotherapy. The third parent had her son undergo a battery of assessments in order to have a medical diagnosis, hoping that these interventions would provide her with more information about her son's difficulties. She commented that this was necessary in order for her son to receive appropriate accommodations at school. Two out of the three parents involved in this research had medical diagnoses and their children were on an IEP based on involvements with these professionals. The third parent was undergoing the process of having assessments and an IEP completed by the school.

All three parents spoke about their children in comparison to typically developing children. Although it was obvious that the parents were advocates for their children, they seemed to also support the medical model through their use of language and attempted to have their child fit the school environment as opposed to having the school make accommodations to fit the needs of their children. An inclusive school environment is one where the school adjusts its physical, social, attitudinal, educational, communication and institutional barriers to accommodate all children (Rieser, 2006b). The schools these children have attended are not inclusive schools. Their practices exclude children with special needs in public education.

Hiatt-Michael (2004) concurred by discussing the practice of medical involvement and interventions with children with special needs in public education. She argued that these practices attempt to put children with special need into categories and sub-categories by diagnosis. She articulated that rather than putting labels on children, all children should be considered different as a norm and the rational is explained:

Therefore, educators and parents, noting so many different labels and multiple sub-categories, are beginning to recognize the uniqueness of each child. Based upon this

recognition of differences rather than labels or categories, teachers and parents should consider an IEP for every child with or without a disability. As children with special needs are mainstreamed into the general classrooms, teachers and parents will focus less upon the 'average' or 'normal' type of child. This vision is that all children have special needs and instruction should be tailored to each child. (p.10)

Valid points are made by Hiatt-Michael (2004) when she stated that all children have different learning styles and by having all children on an IEP results in individual learning needs being tailored to. This could also decrease the stigmatization and exclusion of children based on their special needs because all children would be classified as having a special need. Having all children on an individual learning plan supports the Social Model (Rieser, 2006b) where the curriculum and school environment is adapted to meet student's needs and not the reverse.

Fear and Victimization

Existing literature on parent's perspectives supported this key finding. Similarities are that research shows that parents prefer to have their child with special needs in an inclusive classroom for the purposes of increased social interactions (Bennett et al., 1997; Buysse et al., 2001; Rafferty et al., 2001). All parents in this study identified wanting more socialization with typically developing peers as well as other children with special needs. This was identified as one of the foremost concerns in existing literature by parents who have children with special needs due to victimization at school (Jones et al., 2001; Rafferty et al., 2001). All parents in the study identified that their children were teased, picked on and/or bullied as a result of their special need.

One parent was informed that her child was being placed in a specialized kindergarten program for children with behavioural difficulties. He was segregated based on his special need.

Her son was in a classroom designed for children with special needs. This decreased his opportunity for social interactions with typically developing peers. Given that there was only one other child with a special need in this program, his social interactions decreased drastically again. This parent stated on a number of occasions that her son enjoyed interacting with other children and argued that he could not learn appropriate social skills without the opportunity to engage with peers. Another parent commented that her son was functionally integrated. Although he was in a classroom with other children with special needs and typically developing children, the opportunities for interactions were quite limited given that he had a one to one worker present at all times. This child also sat separately in the classroom from his typically developing peers and the children with special needs were encouraged to socialize amongst themselves. The third parent had her child in a mainstream classroom with pull-outs throughout the day. There were typically developing peers in this classroom however during the interviews, an IEP was being developed and the recommendation was for him to be segregated in a classroom of children with special needs. This parent also expressed wanting more opportunities for her son to socialize with other children.

All parents identified that their children were being victimized by peers at school and disagreed with the lack of socialization with their peers. All three children were excluded from academic programming and social and recreational activities from their typically developing peers. Villa and Thousand (2005) stated that "...many of the current problems facing children and youth at risk are the casualties of an inflexible, insensitive system of education that systematically destroys the self-esteem and self-worth of students who do not 'fit the mold'" (p. 6). Certainly, according to these parents' experiences, their children do not 'fit the mold' and they are excluded in educational opportunities as a result.

Systems

Existing literature vaguely addressed the key finding of systems. This finding focused on the need for parents to manage the educational system by becoming assimilated into the system. The dominance of “systems-speak” (Snow, 2006) is pervasive in parent’s responses and there were several indicators in their language that supported this finding. Snow (2006) asserted that “cultures and institutions develop unique languages, which have a profound effect on voice. These languages shape and support or inhibit the expression of voice” (p. 45). The time and skill needed to navigate the system, the need to be aware of the laws, policies, procedures and regulations and the need to interface with professionals in the system are reflected in parents’ comments. Their language is dominated by systems language including fluency in policy and procedures, everyday use of systems acronyms and consistent use of systems terms and phrases. Cannella (1997) explained that “forms of discourse are not our own, but have emerged from complex historical, social and power contexts” (p. 104) and that our language is historically formed by those in power within these environments. Snow (2006) concurred that language is created by the powerful (school board personnel) and the less powerful (parents) must seek fluency in the institutional language in order to gain power and voice. This was obvious with the parents in this research study.

All parents commented on the expectations and the time commitments required by the school to support their children with special needs. Parents identified feeling overwhelmed by the school’s requests for meetings regarding parent and teacher/educational assistant communication, suspension meetings, other professional’s involvement, both at school and at other community agencies and hospitals as well as IEP’s and IPRC’s meetings. These meetings were described as being bureaucratic and parents commented on struggling with coordinating

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their professional and personal responsibilities. Research indicated that parents who have children with special needs tend to have fewer work options, get more phone calls from other professionals at work and call home and/or leave work early more often to meet the unique demands of parenting their children [Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), 2002; Panitch, 2008). Furthermore, parents who have children with special needs tend to struggle more with vocational, financial, emotional and physical stressors than parents who do not have children with special needs. (CUPW, 2002). The Canadian Postal Workers Union conducted a study with employees who have children with special needs. The research found that "...a significant number of spouses of CUPW members who had children with disabilities were either unemployed, underemployed or worked part-time because of the demands of their child's disability or health condition" (p. 16). All parents in this research study identified with these difficulties and stressed the impact of such stressors on their lives.

This research study found that exclusion takes many forms in the public education; ranging from several variations of segregation; suspensions and expulsions from school; having one to one workers and pull outs from classrooms. Exclusion can also take more subtle forms where children with special needs are unable to interact with and are victimized by their typically developing peers and cannot attend school during strikes due to the lack of resources. Exclusion can be as simple as being unable to attend a class trip without their parent present or eating lunch in the same classroom as other students but sitting separately with a one to one worker.

Parents of children with special needs themselves engaged in the exclusion of their children by their use of language and by comparing their children to "normal" children. Parents supported schools segregating their children during certain instances and claimed that they were

protecting their children and didn't realize they were inadvertently engaging in exclusion despite claiming to be advocates for inclusion.

Children with special needs are excluded in public education despite the right to have access to inclusive quality education under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Education for All (1990) and the Salamanca Statement (1994). Furthermore, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982), the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2007) and the Ontario Ministry of Education (2007) also declare equitable rights for all people, including those with special needs. The TDSB (2007) outlines their principles of supporting and accommodating their students however their practices have indicated otherwise in this research study. From a social justice perspective, children with special needs are not presented the opportunities to be included in public education. Their rights are in violation based on the frequency of exclusionary practices and access to equitable educational services is denied. Children with special needs continue to be defined as the 'other' (Cannella, 1997) in a society where attitudes are dominated by the medical model (Rieser, 2006a). Children's voices continue to be silenced and they, including their parents, are oppressed and marginalized by an institution that frequently engages in exclusion based on differences.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of the study include that there were difficulties in recruiting participants and the researcher recruited through a sampling of convenience (Creswell, 2005) as a result. Two out of the three participants knew the researcher through a personal connection and are health care professionals, as is the researcher. One of the participants was a co-worker and this may have affected their responses to questions posed although all participants answered the questions asked by the researcher thoroughly.

One of the main limitations is the sole focus of this paper on experiences of exclusion. Although the researcher saw evidence of inclusion, these were beyond the scope of the study and do not appear on these pages. For example, one parent revealed that inclusive experiences can exist amongst children with special needs, when they interact with each other, protect and defend each other in the presence of their peers. They seemed to come to each other's assistance in the presence of a threat with their typically developing peers than not. Further, children with special needs experience inclusion when their parents speak on their behalf and insist they are treated fairly and the school board personnel comply. They experience inclusion when educational assistants and one to one workers support them and provide them with meaningful opportunities to engage in with adults. Nonetheless, these experiences are ad hoc and therefore would not impact on institutional procedures and practices.

Future Research

Although the three parents interviewed were of different cultural backgrounds, they were all fluent in the English language and were of middle socio-economic status. All parents had Canadian post-secondary educational qualifications although their partner's qualifications may have differed. Future directions for research could include having a more diverse sample size where parents were of different linguistic, socio-economic and immigration status. Exploring the experiences of parents whose primary language is not English would be interesting given that there could be differences around the key finding of systems and systems language. How these parents are able to grasp the language and navigate through the bureaucracies, policies and procedures could be explored. Cultural differences could also be explored to study the differences in the parent's ability to be advocates for their children with special needs within the education system. Alongside parent's voices, children's voices are also pertinent to

understanding how their educational experiences have impacted their lives. It would be important to give children the opportunity to speak about their encounters in the education system as they are in the best position to discuss the impact of exclusionary practices on their lives.

In addition, experiences of inclusion need to be systematically investigated in future studies in order to provide a balanced understanding of the experiences of parents in the school system.

Recommendations

There are a number of recommendations that emerged from this research study. Data results, findings and interpretations conclude that children with special needs experience exclusion repeatedly. Children's voices are silenced in the education systems therefore parents are the ideal advocates for their children. Parent's voices must be strengthened and heard. Their opinions are vital in determining appropriate educational opportunities for their children with special needs as they are the best decision makers for their children. Parent's need to feel supported by school personnel in order to remain actively invested in providing safe and inclusive educational experiences for their children. They need support from other parents and personnel in the education system which can provide them with an opportunity to feel less isolated. Parent support groups can be initiated in order to validate their concerns and reduce the stigma and isolation that can result. Support groups would present the parents with a chance to meet other parents who may have experienced similar incidences and they can make meaningful connections.

Diversity exists amongst children with special needs as it does with all individuals in society. Early learning centres have successfully developed and implemented inclusive spaces

for children with special needs. The public education system needs to draw upon this model and start implementing change for all its students. Categorizing all children with special needs under a larger umbrella that defines them all as 'deficient' is discrimination and instigates exclusive practices. These philosophies influence typically developing children and hinder a change in societal views of people with special needs. Inclusive spaces that are successfully implemented act as catalysts for change in discriminatory ideology and practices in the education system and society as a whole.

Finally, teachers and school personnel, including administrators, require appropriate training about children with special needs and how to help facilitate inclusion in public education. They lay the foundation for learning amongst students in schools and their practices can either enhance or hinder inclusive spaces for children.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the dominant findings were that children with special needs experience exclusion in the public education system often. Opportunities for inclusion are virtually non-existent for children with special needs and their rights, under a number of policies and legislations, are violated. From a social justice perspective, these children and their families are denied the right to access equitable, inclusive, non-discriminatory educational opportunities.

This research study also found that children with special needs are defined within the limitation of their special need, as either normal or abnormal, based on a medical model of disability (Rieser, 2006a). This is common practice by parents themselves, other adults in the children's lives, personnel in the educational system, other professionals involved in the child's life and society at large. Comparisons are made between children with special needs and their typically developing peers as normal and/or abnormal in many facets of children's lives. As a

result, parents face everyday situations with their children pertaining to fear and victimization.

This fear is related to their social-emotional well being and future opportunities for success.

Children with special needs tend to be victimized by their typically developing peers, other children with special needs, adults and professionals in their lives, personnel in the educational system and again, society at large. Educational systems-speak (Snow, 2006) dominates the language, knowledge base and personal and professional schedules of these parent's lives.

Parents' attempts at advocating on behalf of their children with special needs in the education system are dependant on their fluency within the systems language. This in turn, contributes to the parent's ability to have a voice for inclusive spaces for their children with special needs in public education. At times, their voice is strong and persuasive. At other times, their voice is silenced.

The education system is involved in the exclusion of children with special needs.

Exclusion can be deliberate but there are also subtle ways of excluding that can take many forms and are not as obvious. Although changes have occurred in the school system to have children with special needs included in various environments, many areas need to continue working towards equity for all children.

Appendix A
Ryerson University Consent Agreement
Master of Arts in Early Childhood Studies, Major Research Paper
Exclusion in Public Education: The Experiences of Parents with Young Children with Special Needs

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you agree to be a participant, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as you need to so you can be sure you understand what you are being asked to do.

Investigator:

Gurjeet Dhillon B.A., C.Y.W.

Professor Rachel Langford, PhD
Master of Arts Program in Early Childhood Studies
School of Early Childhood Education
Ryerson University
rlangfor@ryerson.ca
416-979-5000 ext. 7635
(Investigator's Advisor).

Purpose of the Study:

This study is part of a Major Research Project taken on by me as a requirement for graduation with a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Studies. The purpose of the research is to know more about the experiences of parents who have children with special needs in the public education system. Specifically, I want to interview parents who have children with special needs in kindergarten, grade one and/or grade two.

Description of the Study:

I would like to have an interview with you. The interview can take place at Ryerson University or any other place that we both agree on. It will be about 45 minutes to one hour long. Examples of questions I will be asking are:

1. Can you tell me about your child? Please comment on their strengths and areas that you feel make your child unique.
2. How are children with special needs viewed in your culture?
3. What has been your experience with your child throughout their earlier years in social settings with other children their age?
4. What has been your experience with your child in the education/school system?
5. Please explain the types of supports that your child has received since they started school.
6. Please explain the supports you feel the school has provided for you.
7. As a parent, what role do you want to play while your child is in a public school?

Risks or Discomforts:

It is possible that you may be uncomfortable during the interview because the information being gathered is about your experiences with your child and the public education system. If you feel

uncomfortable, you can skip any of the questions and/or end the interview at any time by simply letting me know that you wish to stop.

Benefits of the Study:

This interview may allow you to speak about your feelings and experiences within the education system. It may be a chance for you to voice your concerns and get some information about inclusion of children with special needs in public schools. I cannot guarantee though, that you and/or your child will get any benefits from participating in this study.

Confidentiality:

As a participant, your name, your child's name and any other information that would identify you will be kept confidential and will not be published at any time. The study will be submitted in the form of a final research paper for a Master's degree from Ryerson University and a copy of the final paper will be stored in the Ryerson University library.

The interview will be tape-recorded and a transcript of all your answers will be made of the tape recording. Once the tape recording is made, you will not be able to review or edit the tape(s) before the transcripts are completed. You may ask to see the transcripts when they are finished and ask to have information in your interview changed/deleted by letting me know after the interview is completed. All names will be kept confidential and will not be shown on the label of the tape or the transcript. The transcripts and tape recording will be kept private in a secured locked place and will only be used by me and destroyed after one year.

Incentives to Participate:

As a participant, you will not be paid to participate in this study.

Costs and/or Compensation for Participation:

There are costs for you to participate which includes up to one hour of your time, transportation costs to and from Ryerson or the place that we mutually agree on to meet for the interview.

Voluntary Nature of Participation:

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate or not to participate, it will not influence your present or future relations with Ryerson University and/or your child's school. If you decide to participate, you can stop your participation at any time up to the point where I am writing the first draft of my thesis.

Questions about the Study:

If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact

Principal Investigator/Student: Gurjeet Dhillon
Email Address g4dhillo@ryerson.ca

Research Supervisor/Dr. Rachel Langford
Email Address langfor@ryerson.ca

If you have questions regarding your rights as a human subject and participant in this study, you may contact the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board for information.

Research Ethics Board

C/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation
Ryerson University
350 Victoria Street
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3
416-979-5042

Agreement:

By signing below, you're agreeing that you have read the information in this agreement and have asked as many questions as you have about the study. Your signature also means that you are participating in this study as a volunteer and you have been told that you can change your mind at any time and decide you don't want to participate any more. This can happen up until the time when I start writing the first draft of the thesis.

You have been given a copy of this agreement to keep.

You have been told that by signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

Name of Participant (please print)

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

Agreement to be Audio taped

Your signature below indicates that you agree to be audio taped and that a transcript be made of the interview. If you wish, you may read the transcript before the report is completed. If you wish to have any information taken out that you gave during the interview, you may do so then. Names will be kept confidential and will not be written anywhere on the label of the tape or the transcript. The tape recording will be kept private in a secured location and will only be listened to by me and destroyed after one year.

Name of Participant (please print)

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix B
Participant Recruitment Flyer

ATTENTION PARENTS!!! I NEED YOUR HELP

I am looking for parents of children with special needs to participate in a research study. If you have a child in kindergarten, grade one or grade two with special needs, I would love to hear from you! My research involves asking questions about your experiences related to accessing specialized services at school for your child.

I will be sharing the report only with my supervising professor, the research committee and the school of ECE at Ryerson. I promise your name, your child's name, the school's name will not be used at any point. If you are interested, there will be a one hour interview where I will be asking you questions about your child and your experiences with the school board. This meeting can take place at a time that is convenient for you.

**THE INFORMATION YOU TELL ME WILL BE
STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL!!!**

If you would like to participate, please speak to your worker and they can pass your contact information to me or you can email me anytime at g4dhillo@ryerson.ca. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have before you commit to participating. If you change your mind, you can withdraw from the research at any point.

I would really appreciate your help with my study!

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