

A Case Study of a Highly Effective, Inclusive Elementary School

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Abstract

Current federal legislation holds schools accountable for ensuring that all students, including those with disabilities, make adequate yearly progress on academic achievement measures, while also including students with disabilities in general education settings whenever possible. Schools are thus expected to be both excellent and equitable in addressing the needs of all students. Evidence reveals that only a limited number of schools have been successful in meeting these sometimes competing demands for excellence and equity. This investigation addressed these issues by conducting a case study of a highly effective, inclusive elementary school. The results reveal several key practices that were important contributors to meeting the needs of all students in this school.

Keywords

inclusion, program effectiveness, qualitative research, accountability, case study

Since 1975, federal law has mandated that students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment. Over the years, this mandate has been strengthened through reauthorizations of Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA; 2004) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; 2001) to create a presumption in favor of educating students with disabilities in the general education classroom, providing these students with access to the general education curriculum, and ensuring that they make progress in that curriculum (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). These mandates have put pressure on schools to be equitable and excellent in addressing the needs of all students.

Evidence indicates that progress has been made toward including most students with disabilities in general education settings for much of the school day in many schools (McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2011; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). For example, the percentage of students with disabilities who are educated for most of the school day (i.e., 80% or more) in the general education classroom has increased from 34% in 1990-1991 to 58% in 2007-2008 (McLeskey et al., 2011). Evidence also is available indicating that some schools have achieved excellent outcomes for most students, including those with disabilities and others who struggle to learn (Farrell, Dyson, Polat, Hutcheson, & Gallannaugh, 2007; Ushomirsky & Hall, 2010). However, little evidence exists indicating that schools have been successful in doing both, that is, achieving excellent outcomes for students in highly inclusive settings.

We could find no investigations of schools that were inclusive and achieved excellent student outcomes that were conducted in the United States. However, Farrell et al. (2007) addressed the need for this type of information by conducting case studies of highly effective, inclusive schools in England by using national data to locate these schools based on two criteria. First, schools were identified as inclusive if they enrolled a large number of students with special educational needs relative to other characteristics of the school population. Thus, Farrell and colleagues assumed that these schools educated students in inclusive classrooms, but had no direct data to document this assumption. Second, they used student achievement levels on a national assessment instrument to determine that schools were highly effective. Based on these criteria, Farrell and colleagues located 12 schools across grade levels that were inclusive and highly effective, and conducted case studies in these settings.

The findings of these case studies revealed that these schools shared several common characteristics, including the following: (a) schools were welcoming and supportive of all students, (b) educating students with disabilities was accepted by teachers as part of their typical activities,

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(c) schools emphasized raising the achievement levels of all students, (d) tracking systems were used to monitor individual student progress, (e) instructional practices were recognizably good across classrooms, (f) appropriate levels of resources were used efficiently and effectively, and (g) resources were used flexibly to support student needs. It is important to note that this investigation may not be generalizable, as it was conducted in a setting where special education practices differ substantially from those in the United States. Thus, there is a need for further research regarding the qualities of effective, inclusive schools in the United States.

Given the current emphases in the United States on ensuring academic excellence for all students and educating students with disabilities in inclusive settings, as well as the lack of previous research addressing this topic, it seems especially important to determine how schools are successful in addressing these sometimes competing demands. This investigation was designed to begin to address this need, as qualitative methods were used to study one elementary school that has been successful in including students with disabilities for much of the school day in general education classrooms, while improving educational outcomes to levels that were well above average for these and other students who struggle to learn. The research question that guided this research was as follows:

Research Question 1: What are factors contributing to the success of a highly effective, inclusive elementary school?

Method

Selection of the Elementary School

The elementary school that was the focus of this case study was selected using critical case sampling (Patton, 2002) to select a case that “would yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge” (p. 236). Key dimensions that we used to select this school were a setting in which students with disabilities were included in general education classrooms at a level that was well above the local district and state averages, and achievement levels for students with disabilities and those who struggle in core content areas (reading and mathematics) that were well above district and state averages. Evidence from previous research suggests that the number of elementary schools that are inclusive and highly effective is very limited (Farrell et al., 2007; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). This critical case would thus have the potential to provide information and insight regarding what an elementary school does to support students and teachers in a setting that is inclusive and highly effective.

Initially, we sought recommendations and examined accountability data on schools that were potential candidates.

Several colleagues recommended an elementary school in a small community in Florida. We examined data related to student achievement and inclusive placements for this school and found that it met our selection criteria. On contacting the principal of this school, she expressed a willingness to participate in this case study, and the authors were convinced that she and her school would be a rich information source. Thus, Creekside Elementary School (CES; a pseudonym) was selected for this case study.

Setting

CES is the only elementary school in a small town of about 4,500 and thus serves all students in Grades K-4 from this community and the surrounding rural area. At the time this investigation was conducted, approximately 480 students were enrolled at CES, which had 42 teachers (including two special education teachers) and 12 paraeducators. All of the teachers were highly qualified for their positions, and 53% had advanced degrees in education. The teaching experience of the staff was varied, as 45% had 5 years or less experience, whereas 33% of the teachers had 15 or more years of experience.

Fifty-two percent of the students at CES were from high-poverty backgrounds (i.e., eligible for free or reduced lunch), whereas about 17% were identified with a disability. These data were similar to those for the local school district (49% of students from high-poverty backgrounds and 17% identified with disabilities) and state (53.5% from high-poverty backgrounds and 14% with disabilities). At CES, 68% of the students were Caucasian, whereas 32% were from African American, Hispanic, and multiracial or other ethnic groups. The diversity at CES was somewhat less than the district and state, as 48% of students in the local district were Caucasian, whereas 52% were from other ethnic groups. For the state, 44% of students were Caucasian, whereas 56% were from other ethnic groups.

Students with disabilities at CES include those with learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, orthopedic impairments, deaf/hearing impaired, autism spectrum disorders, emotional/behavior disabilities, intellectual disability, developmental delays, and other health impairments. CES has received an “A” grade from Florida’s Department of Education for the last 3 years and met 100% of NCLB’s adequate yearly progress criteria in 2008-2009, 97% in 2009-2010, and 100% in 2010-2011.

Evidence from several sources reveals that CES has been highly successful in including students with disabilities in general education classrooms and improving outcome data for students with disabilities and those who struggle to meet standards. As Table 1 indicates, before starting the inclusion program in 2006, placement data at CES were similar to data for the school district and state. Currently, all students spend 80% or more of the school day in general education

Table 1. Least Restrictive Environment Placement Data for Creekside Elementary School, Local District, and State.

Placement ^a	Creekside		District ^b		State	
	05–06 (%)	09–10 (%)	05–06 (%)	09–10 (%)	05–06 (%)	09–10 (%)
General education	66	100	64	68	55	63
Resource	21	0	18	15	19	15
Separate class	13	0	14	13	23	17

^aGeneral education is defined as 80% or more of the school day in a general education classroom; resource is defined as 40% to 79% of the school day in a general education classroom; and separate class is defined as up to 39% of the school day in a general education classroom. ^bSome percentages do not add to 100 because some students are educated in separate school settings.

Table 2. Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT): Percentage of Students Meeting Proficiency Criterion (Level 3 or Higher) in Reading and Math for 2008–2009.

Group	CES		District		State	
	Reading (%)	Math (%)	Reading (%)	Math (%)	Reading (%)	Math (%)
All students	85	86	70	70	71	74
Students with disabilities	69	58	32	36	33	38
Students from high-poverty backgrounds	73	70	45	47	51	56

Note. CES, Creekside Elementary School.

classrooms, which is a substantially greater proportion of students than average figures for the district or state. These data thus reveal that CES has moved toward a much more inclusive model than most schools in the district or state. Of course, these data only indicate that students with disabilities spend most of the school day in general education classrooms and are not indicative of the quality of these settings or how they influence student outcomes.

Data in Table 2 address student outcomes and include a comparison of the percentage of students who reached Level 3 or higher (proficiency) in reading and math on the state's accountability measure at CES for 2008–2009, and for the district and state for 2008–2009. (Data from 2008–2009 are provided because these data were used to select CES for this case study.) These data reveal that more than double the percentage of students with disabilities reached proficiency in reading, and substantially more students in math, compared with district and state averages. Students from high-poverty backgrounds who often struggle to meet accountability standards also did substantially better at CES when compared with district and state averages.

Finally, assessment data for students with disabilities before the inclusive program began and data from the 2008–2009 school year (see Table 2) provide evidence that the inclusive program resulted in improved student outcomes. Student achievement data at the end of the 2005–2006 academic year indicate that 30% of students with disabilities at CES scored at a proficiency level (i.e., Level 3 or higher) in reading, whereas 33% scored at this level in math. By the end of the 2008–2009 school year, these proficiency rates

had increased to 69% of all students with disabilities in reading and 58% in math.

Design of the Study

Qualitative case study methods (Merriam, 2009) were used in this investigation to examine the critical features of CES that contributed to the success of this highly effective, inclusive school. The case study took place over 6 months during the 2009–2010 school year, as the investigators interviewed teachers and administrators, observed in classrooms, and examined documents (e.g., school improvement plan, state and federal accountability reports) to better understand the educational program at CES. What we sought was an emic (Patton, 2002) or insider's perspective on these issues as we interviewed teachers and administrators regarding how CES maintains high levels of achievement for such a large proportion of their students.

Data sources. We conducted 22 individual interviews with teachers and administrators. This included all teachers and administrators who were directly involved in the implementation of the inclusive program (i.e., co-teachers, administrators who worked with the inclusive planning team). We initially interviewed each of these professionals once (a total of 13 interviews) and then did follow-up interviews with the school principal as well as eight of the teachers, including both special education teachers, who proved to be rich information sources. The median length of the individual interviews was approximately 35 min, with a range

Table 3. Examples of Questions from Interview 1 and Interview 2.

Interview	Sample questions
Interview 1	<p>How was the inclusive program planned and implemented in your school?</p> <p>What type of professional development have you received to support inclusive practices in your classroom?</p> <p>Have you received adequate resources to support the inclusive program in your classroom?</p> <p>How would you describe how services are delivered to students with disabilities and others who struggle to learn academic skills?</p> <p>How do you monitor student progress to ensure that students are making adequate progress and that interventions are working?</p>
Interview 2	<p>What are the key factors that support inclusion and improved academic achievement outcomes in your school? Why does inclusion work?</p> <p>What are the issues or key factors that make inclusion and improved academic outcomes difficult to achieve? What are the barriers or impediments to a successful inclusive program?</p> <p>How do you balance the use of resources and providing sufficient student support?</p> <p>How would you describe the sense of community that exists in your school?</p> <p>How is the principal involved in supporting the inclusive program and improved student achievement?</p>

from 24 min to 92 min. (Median length of interviews is reported as a better measure of central tendency, as two interviews were much longer than others.) Each of the interviews was audio-taped and transcribed.

The initial interviews with teachers and administrators consisted of open-ended questions regarding factors that contributed to the success of the highly effective, inclusive program at CES. We used themes that emerged from this first set of interviews and from classroom observations to formulate questions that guided the second set of interviews. Examples of questions that were included in both interviews are included in Table 3.

Prior to the second interview, we observed in each of the 10 co-taught, inclusive classrooms. We observed classrooms during reading, writing, and mathematics instruction. During instruction, the general and special education teachers were engaged predominantly in station teaching (Friend & Cook, 2010) using centers, but we also observed teachers working as a team (sharing responsibility for the lesson) and during times when one teacher was teaching and the other was assisting. These observations lasted from 60 to 90 min and were documented using field notes. The purpose of these observations was to document the instructional approaches and grouping practices that were used at CES and to provide information that would be used to formulate questions for subsequent interviews.

Data analysis. The interview transcripts and field notes from observations were reviewed to identify emergent themes using a four-step process. First, as interview and observation data became available, one of the investigators pulled apart or bracketed the data to identify essential elements that could be used to define possible emergent themes (Patton, 2002) and discussed these themes with a second investigator.

Second, following the completion of all of the interviews and observations, two of the investigators reviewed the data to provide different perspectives and to develop “imaginative variation” (Patton, 2002, p. 486) on the themes. Third, the investigators developed a set of themes that were presented to a group of 10 teachers and the school principal for feedback and a member check. Finally, the two investigators worked collaboratively to use this feedback to develop the final set of themes that emerged from this investigation.

Trustworthiness

Several methods were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the themes that emerged from this investigation (Merriam, 2009). First, triangulation across observations and interviews was used to support the credibility of the themes that emerged. Second, the investigators engaged in prolonged engagement and persistent observation, spending a considerable amount of time in the setting conducting the case study and examining specific themes as they emerged. Third, the two investigators collaboratively examined the data to determine key themes, using a form of peer debriefing at each step of data analysis. Finally, a member check was conducted with teachers and administrators at CES to provide input regarding the credibility of the themes as they emerged.

Results and Discussion

This investigation examined the key qualities that supported high student achievement in an inclusive elementary school. The major themes that emerged are included in Table 4. These themes are organized into two overarching areas: (a) Student Support and Instructional Quality and (b) Administrative and Organizational Features.

Table 4. Themes That Emerged From the Case Study of Creekside Elementary School.

Themes
<i>Student support and instructional quality</i>
1. Meeting the needs of <i>all</i> students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers and administrators have high expectations for academic achievement and behavior of all students • School staff take the stance of warm demanders as they support all students • Students with disabilities are supported as a “natural” or ordinary part of support that is provided for all students
2. Providing high-quality instruction for all students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High-quality instruction provided in general education classrooms • Providing high-quality instruction for students with disabilities in all settings • Characteristics of high-quality instruction
3. Immersing teachers in professional development opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take every opportunity to improve teacher practice • Collective participation of teachers • Learning from one another by creating your own experts
<i>Administrative and organizational features</i>
4. Very efficient, but flexible use of resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CES is organized like a well-oiled machine • School days are rigidly scheduled • The rigid schedule allows for flexible use of resources when unexpected needs arise.
5. Shared decision making
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers make classroom level decisions • The principal does not micromanage classroom practices, but holds teachers accountable for student outcomes • Shared decision making has helped to build a sense of community among teachers
6. Data drive everything
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers and administrators are “flooded” with data • School staff developed their own data system tied to curriculum/expectations • Data are used to inform all decisions

Note. CES, Creekside Elementary School.

Student Support and Instructional Quality

Three themes emerged related to student support and instructional quality. These themes addressed teacher perspectives and beliefs about meeting the needs of all students, how these beliefs were enacted in classrooms, and how teachers improved their skills to meet the needs of all students.

Meeting the needs of all students. The emphasis on meeting the needs of *all* students at CES was one of the strongest themes that emerged. The administration and teachers were committed to meeting the needs of all students, including every “subgroup” (e.g., gifted students, students from high-poverty backgrounds) or disability category of students who attended the school. This perspective was addressed in

many of the interviews, but was best captured by the principal at Creekside, Ms. Richards:

My personal goal is that we meet *all* kid needs. You may look at what we need to meet the gifted kids needs, the LD kids, but because it is an overall need, we’ve got to improve to meet all kid needs and all kids’ achievement. That’s how we started it and it didn’t turn into a *program* or a *fix* for one group, but how to meet the needs of *all* students and make everyone successful.

Many of the teachers echoed this same perspective. As a kindergarten teacher, Ms. Oldham, said, “We aim high for everyone. We have a general expectation for everyone [to achieve and behave at high levels].” A special education teacher, Ms. Wood, expanded on this notion when she said, “Teachers are all about student needs. We have ongoing conversations about challenging students more as the meat of the curriculum is presented to everyone.”

As teachers discussed meeting the needs of all students, it became apparent that they shared a common perspective to ensure that this happens, as teachers we interviewed seemed to take the stance of a “warm demander” (Bondy & Ross, 2008; Ware, 2006). This stance has been described by several researchers in relation to improved outcomes for African American students and has been characterized as part of culturally responsive practice (Bondy & Ross, 2008; Ware, 2006). General characteristics of teachers who are warm demanders include “responding with care, high expectations, and skilled pedagogy” (Ware, 2006, p. 452). Teachers who are warm demanders illustrate this stance when they (a) establish “a caring relationship that convinces students that [they] believe in them” (Bondy & Ross, 2008, p. 55), (b) have high expectations and fully expect all students to learn, (c) are dedicated to meeting the specific needs of all students, and (d) create conditions within the classroom (e.g., improved instruction) to foster the achievement of all students (Ware, 2006).

Although the stance of the warm demander has been closely linked to culturally responsive practice, the teachers and administrators consistently demonstrated the practices of a warm demander at CES for all students who struggled to learn. A second-grade teacher, Ms. Taylor, expressed this well when she described how the entire school community supports a student, Waddell, who continues to struggle with academics and his behavior. She began by noting that “community is big, especially among teachers, and that carries over to the kids.” Waddell had been a former student of Ms. Taylor, and when he was having a difficult day in his third-grade class, he would be sent to her class to provide assistance to other students and to generally “cool down.” She went on to state,

The other kids in the classroom know there are kids coming in and out of my classroom to sit, watch, to help. To do whatever is necessary. Waddell will come

in and we read books with him, and he's in our class. They get the feeling that "I can go anywhere in this school and feel safe." There's a community of support for students too.

It is noteworthy that teachers also worked together to provide instructional support for Waddell when he experienced difficulty in his typical classroom. For example, in one instance we observed, Ms. Wood, a special education teacher, provided Waddell with individual instruction during lunch hour during a period of time he was having difficulty in his third-grade classroom.

Other teachers noted that all staff at CES take responsibility and care for all students, whether in classrooms, in the hallways, on the playground, or after school in the community. As a first-grade teacher, Ms. McGill, said, "We are a family. There are people that you see all day long, and that has really built a great classroom community." She went on to note, "It takes every single person to make this school work the way it does. It's a very welcoming, supportive community. It's just about being open and treating everyone like the person they are."

Comments from the principal and several teachers revealed that this supportive community extends to students with disabilities. While a large group of teachers and administrators worked on a particular set of activities to plan for including students with disabilities at CES (McLeskey & Waldron, 2000), inclusion did not become an add-on program but rather is part of the overall school's attempt to meet the needs of all students. As the principal, Ms. Richards, said,

The inclusion movement came as a plan to meet all kids needs, but in particular students with disabilities. It's not an add-on program that just meets the needs of one group of students. It became part of the whole school's plan for improving achievement for all students. It's not about students with disabilities or gifted students, it's about how can we make every child successful.

Providing high-quality instruction for all students. Another component of the teachers' roles as warm demanders related to how they enacted their high expectations for all students by creating conditions in all classrooms to provide high-quality instruction (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986; Swanson, 2008) and improve the achievement of all students (Ware, 2006). This need was one of the primary motivating factors for teachers and administrators to move to a more inclusive approach for students with disabilities. A third-grade teacher, Ms. Watts, addressed this by saying,

What happened when children were in separate classes, they were not pushed. They were not exposed to pacing. So I don't know that we really ever found

out what those children could do. We locked them in and kept them held back . . . these are your goals and these are the ONLY things we're going to teach you.

The principal was more pointed as she noted,

I watched kids leave very effective instruction [in a general education classroom], leave a very effective reading teacher to go to a very ineffective situation [in a separate class] where they misbehaved, where they just got rote skills. And I thought, they're leaving these wonderful teachers and they're going to this very ineffective setting . . . we have to figure out a way so they can be in there for that effective instruction, but also have a time where they go back and meet some individual skill needs because the regular education teacher can't do all of that.

The principal further noted that the problem was not that the special educators could not provide high-quality instruction, but setting factors such as large caseloads, students with a wide range of skills, limited curricular material, and difficulty coordinating instruction with general education made the delivery of this instruction very difficult.

To address the need for high-quality instruction, the teachers and staff at CES closed their separate special education classrooms, and the teachers and paraeducators who formerly taught students in these settings were assigned to general education classrooms to provide support for students in basic skill areas (i.e., reading, math, and writing). These staff worked collaboratively with general education teachers to provide support for all students who were struggling to learn basic academic skills. This support might include providing explicit instruction to a small, homogeneous group of students (Gersten et al., 2009), supporting students working in collaborative groups as part of station teaching (Friend & Cook, 2010), or teaching a large group while the classroom teacher provided this small-group support. As a kindergarten teacher, Ms. Hopkins, stated,

The model shifted. We collaborate to differentiate instruction and meet the needs of all kids. She [the special education teacher] doesn't just oversee kids with IEPs. She's not separate at all. We've very integrated, very collaborative, with Ms. Richards, the paras, and me. All teachers work with and support all students.

Our observations and interviews confirmed this emphasis on high-quality instruction (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986; Swanson, 2008). Observations revealed that in most settings, instruction tended to be teacher led, direct instruction that was carefully scheduled to keep students engaged in

learning, as well as ensure that the special education teachers and paraeducators were available to provide support. This support was used to differentiate instruction using approaches such as centers, which were made more manageable by the fact that three adults were in the class. At other times, one of the teachers or the paraeducator would work with a small, homogeneous group to provide intensive instruction on specific skills. We also observed many other characteristics that reflected high-quality instruction. These included characteristics such as the following: Teachers were well prepared and carefully planned the school day, learning objectives were clear, activities were varied and students were actively engaged and well behaved, and peers provided support to students who were struggling to learn academic skills in many classes.

Immersing teachers in high-quality professional development. To improve the quality of instruction in all classrooms, the administration and teachers at CES recognized that supports would need to be in place to improve teacher practice. Our observations and interviews revealed that teachers were immersed in high-quality professional development opportunities (Desimone, 2011; McLeskey, 2011) that translated into improved classroom practices. In brief, this research has shown that key qualities of learner-centered professional development include (a) focus on teacher identified needs that are consistent with teacher knowledge and beliefs, and school/district policies; (b) limited use of expert-centered, sit and get forms of professional development; (c) active learning that is classroom embedded and supported by coaching; (d) support that is job embedded and provided over a long period of time; and (e) collective participation of teachers as part of a learning community. As the following sections reveal, these qualities largely describe professional development activities at CES.

The principal, Ms. Richards, ensured that high-quality professional development was provided at CES that addressed teacher identified needs. Moreover, she created a sense of urgency related to improving teacher practice and emphasized taking every opportunity to improve classroom instruction, even during faculty meetings. As Ms. Richards noted,

Why sit through an hour and a half faculty meeting when you can write a memo. When I have the whole faculty sitting there I'd much rather it be things they can use in their classrooms. There is some really successful professional development coming out of faculty meetings. Not just them sitting there thinking about what they should be doing or somebody standing there talking.

Providing professional development activities at faculty meetings offers teachers an opportunity to collaborate and learn from one another. As a Kindergarten teacher, Ms. Oldham, stated, "At every faculty meeting we're

taught something new that helps instruction. We collaborate a lot across grade levels, and learn from one another." Collective participation and shared learning are central themes of professional development at CES, as many such opportunities exist. These include frequent meetings of teachers and administrators in grade level or inclusion planning teams, co-teach chats among teachers who are co-teaching to support inclusive practices, and book studies. To facilitate these activities, common planning time is built into the school schedule and teachers are also encouraged to observe practices in other teachers' classrooms.

As these activities suggest, Ms. Richards does not believe that traveling to outside experts for professional development is useful. "I believe in creating experts in your building and encouraging them to coach others. It's the same way with inclusion, if we've got some people who are leaders, they can share [effective practices] with other people." Thus, her involvement in professional development activities is used to support and encourage teachers to develop expertise and share this expertise "back home."

The emphasis on continuing professional development and teacher growth has resulted in a mind-set on the part of teachers that they will continue to improve their practice. A special education teacher, Ms. Wood, stated this well when she said,

The teachers here aren't complacent to know what they know. They're constantly reaching out trying to go to workshops, trying to gain more refined knowledge, the newest techniques and strategies. They're never complacent, they want to keep learning so that they can help their students.

Administrative and Organizational Features

Themes emerged from this case study related to administrative and organizational features of CES that support high-quality instruction and make it possible. In this section, we begin with the efficient but flexible use of resources, followed by a discussion of how the staff is engaged in shared decision making. We then conclude with a discussion of how data inform all decision making at CES.

Efficient but flexible use of resources. Teachers at CES were unanimous in noting that having sufficient resources was a critical factor related to their success in improving student outcomes. This is not surprising, as reviews of research regarding teacher perspectives on inclusion have consistently shown that a major concern relates to having sufficient resources in the classroom to make inclusion successful (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Waldron, 2007). This requires that most schools, including CES, use the relatively limited resources that are available to them very efficiently. All teachers and administrators we interviewed commented on the highly efficient use of resources at CES. Ms. Wood, a

special education teacher, clearly described this theme as she discussed how she was assigned to support general education teachers. She noted that the co-teaching schedules are adjusted based on student needs and where the co-teachers can be most effective. "Up front I'll tell a teacher, you have a lighter load of kids, so I'm not going to be in your classroom as much because these kids don't require as much services as these other kids do." She went on to describe this efficient use of resources by stating, "[CES] is like a well-oiled machine, where all the parts fit in. Everything is set up as best we can to meet children's individual needs."

This highly efficient, well-oiled machine was perhaps most obvious when examining how the school day is scheduled, and how special education teachers and paraeducators are used during the school day. CES has a fixed schedule for instructional time throughout the school day. The principal agreed that this schedule was rigid compared with most elementary schools, but commented that this was necessary:

I don't know any other way to provide human resources, if you don't know when they're teaching reading. It causes a poor use of resources if you don't have it managed . . . we have to know when people are doing what. We have to have reading at different times to do that. So they [paraeducators and special education co-teachers] can hit those most important times throughout the day. Otherwise, we have an aide in a room when everybody is at specials. That always happens if you don't have it planned out to the minute.

Teachers were supportive of this type of schedule. Although some who had to teach reading later in the day were not pleased, they recognized that the following year the schedule would be adjusted so that other teachers would have reading later in the day. A third-grade teacher, Ms. Wyman, commented on how a fixed schedule was beneficial and allowed time for her to meet with her co-teacher for planning.

Not to pat ourselves on the back, but we follow our schedules! I know when she's [special education co-teacher] going to be with me, and where she is at all times, and that's crucial to planning. The more we can get together to plan, which we do often, it's better and everything is going to go. Of course, sometimes you change things in the middle of your lesson and occasionally you have to wing it. The most important thing is to plan with the co-teacher, then we know what we're going to do, and know whose group is going to do what. Who's doing full group, who's doing small groups. Having a set schedule and built in planning time just makes it go much more smoothly.

Another feature of the schedule that ensures efficiency is the use of resources where they will do the most good. For

example, more resources are used in the early grades, based on the belief that providing intensive support for these students in learning basic skills can prevent many academic problems from developing. In addition, teachers of higher grade levels recognize that their older students can do more work independently and provide more support to struggling peers, allowing the teacher to work more with small groups of students who are struggling.

Thus, the fixed or rigid schedule at CES allows for efficient use of resources, getting resources to students who need them the most, and allows for built-in planning time for teachers who are co-teaching. However, it is important to note that this schedule and the perspective that resources will be used where they are most needed also allows for flexibility when student needs arise unexpectedly and teachers are overwhelmed. As a special education teacher, Ms. Wood, noted,

This year everything is pretty well balanced right now. But I'm always talking to the teachers and try to feel the pulse and see if they're feeling overwhelmed. And if they're feeling overwhelmed, I try to [change my schedule and] get with them and take some of the stress off or provide them more support from a para.

Distributed decision making. Research has revealed that leadership "has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed" (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008, p. 27). Ms. Richards embraces this philosophy as she widely shares decision making at CES. This begins with the general management style she uses when working with teachers, who agree that although Ms. Richards sets general goals related to high expectations for students and student outcomes, she does not micromanage how they provide instruction to meet these goals. Although she observes in classrooms frequently, ensures that generally good teaching is provided, and occasionally provides suggestions to teachers who are struggling, she rarely is directive about telling a teacher how to teach. As Ms. Wood, a special education teacher, stated,

She manages from the top, but she manages in a way that's not intrusive in the classroom. There are expectations set, but if you're doing your job she's not going to bother you about your teaching style. She doesn't make you fit into a mold, she allows you to be the teacher that you are. As long as you are doing what's right for kids, you're teaching to the standards, and you're making progress with kids.

Ms. Richards echoed this perspective when she stated,

I've always believed that I shouldn't micromanage what happens in every classroom. They do what they

want to do as long as it's good for kids, and meeting kids needs. And kids are happy and kids are being successful. What makes a school great is that you have all these different personalities and all these different teaching styles.

As we noted previously, teachers also make most decisions about professional development, based on their perceived needs. This is part of a larger agenda for Ms. Richards, as she engages the school staff in making decisions whenever possible. This may involve the entire school staff when decisions are made about schoolwide issues related to curriculum or student behavior, or it may involve smaller groups of teachers who are directly affected by the decision (e.g., co-teachers or grade-level teams). Ms. Stewart, a special education teacher, commented on this approach:

The good thing about it is that because every teacher has a different teaching style, [Ms. Richards] really lets us decide what we want it to look like in the classroom. She has a general outline, but she definitely lets us decide as a pair how we're going to do [co-teaching], because it's different in every class.

This shared approach to decision making has been at least partially responsible for building a strong sense of community and ownership among teachers at CES. Teachers are respected to make their own decisions about critical issues, and recognize that they are trusted and high-valued members of the school community when this occurs. However, not everyone participates in shared decision making, although there is clearly pressure for teachers to participate. As Ms. Richards noted,

People will tell you most things I don't require them to do. I don't require them to come to meetings. But if they're not at the table, they're not part of decisions. Whatever does come out of that meeting is where the school is moving. They then think "I better be at that meeting because there are going to be decisions made."

Data drive everything. Research by Fuchs, Fuchs, Powell, et al. (2008) on effective math instruction for struggling students found that the most important principle for effective practice is ongoing progress monitoring. This research is put into practice at CES, as teachers are flooded with data to monitor student progress and inform their instruction. The overarching accountability measure for the school is the *Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT)*, which is administered in the third and fourth grades in reading and mathematics, and in the fourth grade in writing. This test is closely aligned with the state's standards, and thus aligns with the content that is being taught at CES. However, this

test is administered in the spring each year, and thus does not provide timely information regarding the ongoing progress of students, nor are the data highly useful for planning instruction for students who are struggling.

This lack of ongoing data to monitor student progress was seen as a major impediment to school improvement, especially by the school principal, Ms. Richards, and led CES to develop their own data system. She noted,

All of the data we use is self-created. We needed real data related to what they're doing in the classroom. When I think about real data in the primary grades, how many letters do they know, how many sounds do they know? That's the data we collect and track here. The district or state is not that helpful for that kind of data. Yes they can produce me a list of FCAT scores by minority students and all that. But real data is what they're seeing in the classroom and their reading skills. How they're progressing is real data to me.

Every teacher we interviewed described a range of sources of data that were used to monitor student outcomes on a consistent basis (e.g., weekly for students who are struggling in reading). These teachers described in detail how they collected these data to monitor the progress of each child who is struggling in their classes. The most frequently mentioned measure was the *Florida Assessments for Instruction in Reading (FAIR)*. This test is administered to students 3 times per year at every grade level and is intended to provide teachers with information regarding student progress in specific areas (e.g., word analysis, reading comprehension) of reading that can be used to plan instruction. Most teachers used the FAIR test and supplemented this information with informal measures, curriculum-based tests, observations, unit tests, RtI progress monitoring measures, district inventory tests in reading and math, and so forth. Most of the teachers aggregate these data in notebooks or individual folders for students, and use this information to plan and monitor the effectiveness of instruction.

Ms. Richards succinctly described the rationale for collecting these data.

How can I have conversations with teachers about their students, how they're progressing, how well they're teaching without individual data about students? So we had to come up with ways to monitor student data. We [use this data to] have good conversations about how kids are doing, how can we get them moving, what resources do you need, and all that.

Thus, data drive decision making at CES and are used to ensure the accountability of all school personnel and related academic progress of every student. Ms. Richards explained

how data are used with individual teachers and how using data has changed the frame of reference of many teachers as they examine individual student progress.

When I'm saying to teachers that I expect these needs to be met, we look at data on all kids. We look at the data and say these kids are doing ok, these aren't gaining. Just by showing a teacher that, and talking about every kid, they got the message that we were looking at every kid, every kid's gains, and when we went through their professional development plans, every kid needed to grow by nine months, and we were going to look at their data three times a year. When that happens, any effective teacher is going to say I'd better start paying attention to individual kid needs. Just by bringing them to the table to look at data for every kid, and holding them accountable, just by pointing that out, they got the message that I better pay attention to every kid. It's no more "teach to the group and hope that they get it." It was "I better make some decisions about some individuals."

A second-grade teacher, Ms. Taylor, expanded on this perspective on how data are used when she said,

One thing that really makes it work is that we see it working so we want to push it further and keep it going. We see the progress the kids are making compared to when they were in pullout, and the advantages that it has and we need to do more to make this work. In the first year, it was like "what have we gotten ourselves into?" After you start seeing the changes in the kids and the progress that they are making, it's a real incentive to keep going and a motivator.

Data are also used in many other ways at CES to drive decision making, including making determinations regarding how resources are distributed. For example, when data from an assessment early in the school year revealed that a large number of students in a kindergarten class were behind in reading, resources were reorganized to provide the teacher with a full-time paraeducator. Ms. Richards provided a final example of how data were used to make decisions regarding professional development, when she noted that

We look at individual kids, but I also look at grade-level data. What staff development does this grade level need that shows up in student performance in certain areas? So we look at a lot of grade-level data too.

Conclusion and Implications

It is noteworthy that the results of this case study of a highly effective, inclusive school are similar in many ways

to the findings of Farrell and colleagues (2007) who conducted case studies of effective, inclusive schools across K-12 grade levels in England. The results of these investigations reveal that in both settings, effective, inclusive schools focused on meeting the needs of all students; provided recognizably high-quality instruction in general education classrooms; used resources efficiently, but flexibly to meet student needs; and used data systems to monitor student progress.

The current investigation resulted in two findings that differed from those of Farrell et al. (2007). In the current investigation, much emphasis was placed on providing teachers with high-quality professional development in the local school to improve their classroom practices. In addition, in the current investigation, teachers were engaged in shared decision making and were largely responsible for making decisions about the approach to instruction that was used in their classrooms. These findings may represent substantive differences in schools that were the focus of these case studies, or they may represent different approaches that are used to provide teachers professional development and engage teachers in decision making in the United States and England.

In spite of the similarity of findings across these investigations, it is important to note that the results of this investigation are not generalizable to other settings. More specifically, it is clear that the particulars regarding the development and implementation of the inclusive program at CES are highly context bound and are unique to a certain school context. It is thus important to keep this limitation in mind when reviewing the results of this study and to interpret these results with caution. More specifically, administrators and teachers should take into account the context of their school when deciding if any of the results of this investigation are generalizable to their setting.

In spite of this limitation, there are certain findings of this investigation that may provide useful implications for practice. One important finding relates to the fact that the faculty and administration at CES developed and implemented a highly effective and inclusive program with little outside assistance, and no additional resources other than those that are typically available to local schools. Although this finding suggests that highly effective, inclusive programs can reasonably be developed in local schools, the results of this investigation suggest that doing this will be a very demanding task, given the many changes that occurred at CES to support these practices (e.g., development of a data system for monitoring student progress).

A second important finding of this investigation is that when examining the themes that emerged, it is clear that there is nothing that is particularly unusual about CES. What school does not strive to meet the needs of all students and provide high-quality instruction for these students by improving teacher practice? Furthermore, most schools

attempt to use resources as efficiently as possible, share decision making with teachers regarding school policies and practices, and use data to guide decisions. What seems to set CES apart is the tenacity with which the administration and teachers address these issues. Perhaps, this is best characterized by the beliefs that teachers have that reflect the stance of a warm demander (Bondy & Ross, 2008)—they have high expectations for all students and are unwilling to accept anything less than high achievement from every student.

A third implication relates to the extent to which CES operates like a “well oiled machine,” efficiently using limited resources to meet student needs. Of course, all schools attempt to efficiently use resources, but at CES, teachers and administrators made very difficult decisions (i.e., assignment and reassignment of special education co-teachers and paraprofessionals) and always put the success of students first (e.g., when the school day was rigidly scheduled) in making these decisions. This ensured that teachers and their students received the resources they needed to provide high-quality instruction and improve outcomes, even in a time of very limited resources for many schools.

Finally, if anything seemed to be unusual at CES, it was the extent to which data drive everything, as teachers are immersed in high-quality, readily usable data. Interviews at CES frequently detailed how they used data to drive decisions regarding instruction, the use of resources, and needs for professional development. Furthermore, the faculty and administration developed their own data system to ensure that the information was tailored to their particular needs and was useful for decision making. Moreover, the data system that was developed and how it was used seemed to be the cornerstone on which the highly effective inclusive program was built at CES.

The most critical area for future research, based on the results of this investigation, relates to expanding this research to other settings. For example, it would be useful to examine schools nationally and across states to investigate the relationship between inclusive practices and student outcomes (Farrell et al., 2007). These data could be used to identify schools that are highly effective and inclusive as well as those that are inclusive and markedly less effective. Research could then address case studies across multiple settings, comparing more and less successful inclusive schools. This research could also provide insight into factors that may be generalizable across settings that influence the development of highly effective, inclusive schools.

In conclusion, although this research suggests that it is possible to develop highly effective, inclusive schools, this task has proven much more difficult than many expected (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). Fortunately, research has emerged in recent years that may make this task somewhat more manageable. This research relates to highly effective instructional strategies in reading and mathematics for

students who struggle, how effective instruction might be delivered using multi-tiered approaches to instruction, how teacher practices may be improved to better meet student needs, and strategies that may be used to achieve broad-based school change (Fuchs, Fuchs, Craddock, et al., 2008; Fullan, 2007; Gersten et al., 2009; McLeskey, 2011; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). This research shows great promise for guiding the practice of teachers and administrators as they seek to develop effective, inclusive programs that are equitable and excellent in meeting the needs of all students.

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