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Pre-service Educational Assistants' Attitudes Toward Inclusion

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Pre-service Educational Assistants' Attitudes Toward Inclusion
By
John Freer

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Pre-service Educational Assistants' Attitudes Toward Inclusion
by
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ABSTRACT

In recent years, educational assistants have taken on an integral role in special education. They often work with the most challenging and vulnerable student population. To prepare EAs, some of Ontario's publicly funded colleges have developed pre-service programs. In Ontario, the number of students receiving special education services in K-12 is increasing, and policy trends are advocating for educational inclusion. Literature has suggested that educators' attitudes toward educational inclusion may impact the extent to which inclusive strategies are implemented. Despite the importance of EAs in the special education team, very few studies have investigated their attitudes toward inclusion. This study investigates pre-service EAs' attitudes toward educational inclusion through the use of semi-structured interviews. Through these interviews, participants pointed out factors they believed could facilitate inclusion, as well as perceived barriers to inclusion. Recommendations are made for future policy, practice, and research based on three themes that emerged from the data.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents Nancy and Randy Freer for working tirelessly

with me as a child in order to spark my love for learning. This spark was not

ignited easily, but they never gave up on me! I would also like to dedicate this

thesis to my fiancé Raquel Rawlings who helped to feed that fire by always

believing in me and encouraging me to achieve my goal of becoming an educator.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my past and future students in hopes

that this fire for teaching and learning will continue to grow.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A History of Exclusion

Special education in Ontario has changed considerably in recent history. Prior to 1980, a great many students with disabilities were excluded from schooling because they were believed to be uneducable (Bennett, Dworet, & Weber, 2013; Brantlinger, 2006). In 1980 a momentous educational reform for special education in Ontario was enacted—Bill 82. As a result of Bill 82, students with exceptionalities were granted the right to a free and public education. For the first time ever, all students with disabilities in Ontario had a right to attend the same school as their peers without disabilities at the public's expense. In the 1980s, the law had changed to grant students with disabilities access to a public education, but the mentality of exclusion had not. For the most part, special education in the 80s consisted of placing students with disabilities into special schools or self-contained classrooms within publicly funded schools. These classrooms were often categorized by the nature of the students' disability (e.g., cognitive, physical, behavioural, etc.) (Bennett et al., 2013). The major provisions of Bill 82 are now embedded in Regulation 181/98 in Ontario's Education Act. In recent years, there has been growing support for more inclusive practices in special education.

Support for a More Inclusive Approach

Disability and special education advocates of the past 35 years have seen great strides. Special education is transforming from a system of exclusion and categorization into a system of inclusion and accessibility. The current (i.e., 2015) state of special education in Ontario is continuing to evolve. There are many policies and procedures in place to help all students requiring special education programming reach their fullest

potential. Each student with an identified exceptionality has an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) to identify the student as exceptional, place the student in the most appropriate educational setting, and review the progress of the student's special education program. In Ontario, the IPRC is required to meet at least once every school year to review the student's educational placement and is required to consider inclusion in the general education classroom before consideration of alternative educational placements (e.g., self-contained classes) (OME, 2007). In addition, the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) mandates that an Individual Education Plan (IEP) must be created for all students who are identified as exceptional. The IEP outlines strengths and needs, accommodations, goals/learning expectations, and evaluation criteria for the identified student. This working document (i.e., the IEP) provides direction and a sense of accountability for the team of educators and health professionals involved in the student's educational programming (OME, 2013a).

The Ontario government does not require all students to be included in the general education classroom. IPRCs evaluate identified students on case-by-case basis. In addition, placement decisions can be influenced by school boards' special education philosophies, which in Ontario tend to differ from one school board to the next (Bennett & Gallangher, 2013). For example, the Windsor Essex Catholic District School Board (WECDSB) promotes "full inclusion" regardless of the severity of a student's needs, whereas the Greater Essex County District School Board (GECDSB) provides special education using a *cascade model*, where students are placed in the environment that is deemed least restrictive/most enabling. Despite these philosophical differences, Ontario has seen a push toward inclusive education in the last decade. As a result, a great many

students with exceptionalities are included in general education classes. Inclusionary approaches to special education have become the norm in many countries (Hamaidi, Homidi, & Reyes, 2012; Mittler, 1995). For example, the Salamanca Statement (an international initiative) discusses "The fundamental policy shifts required to promote the approach of inclusive education, namely enabling schools to serve all children, particularly those with special educational needs" (UNESCO, 1994, p. iii). Despite a general push for more inclusive education internationally, the way in which inclusion is defined and implemented differs from one country to the next.

Inclusive practices are being utilized more than ever before, but this practice/philosophy is a controversial one, resulting in differences of professional opinions among stakeholders. Some have asserted that inclusion is a matter of social justice (Artiles, Harris-Murri, & Rostenberg, 2006; Winzer & Mazurek, 2011), whereas, others have pointed out that specialized/segregated classes offer much needed individualized attention for students with special education needs (Kauffman, Bantz, & McCullough, 2002; Simmons & Bayliss, 2007; Wang, 2009). Nevertheless, there has been a great deal of momentum for inclusive special education in recent years.

A team of professionals often works together to implement an individual's special education program, as outlined in the student's IEP. Some of these professionals might include speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, principals, special education teachers, parents, and educational assistants (EAs). The special education teacher will often develop the IEP in conjunction with the classroom teacher, but central to the implementation of the IEP are the teachers and EAs. Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden indicated that some of the biggest concerns expressed by teachers in inclusive classrooms

were the need for more support, resources, training, and time (2000). EAs help to address some of these concerns. With the help of additional staff, policies, and procedures, special education and inclusion have become an integral part of Ontario's education system.

EAs in Special Education

According to the OME (2015), "in 2013-14 school boards reported that 16.59% of the total student population, or 334,312 students were receiving special education programs and/or services" (slide 5). Fifty-five percent of students receiving special education were identified as exceptional (i.e., 186,492) while 45% were not formally identified. In addition, it was reported that, "approximately 83% of all students…receiving special education programs and/or services are placed in regular classrooms for more than half of the instructional day" (OME, 2015). In order to promote student success and meet the growing needs of Ontario's inclusive milieu in special education there has been an influx of EAs being employed in Ontario schools and elsewhere (Angelides, Constantinou, & Leigh, 2009; Giangreco, Doyle, & Suter, 2012; Groom, 2006; Liston, Nevin, & Malian, 2009; Symes & Humphrey, 2011). In Ontario, this growth is projected to continue into the foreseeable future (MTCU, 2013).

In the literature, EAs are also referred to as educational support staff, educational aides, teachers' assistants, learning support assistants, paraeducators, etc. depending on the geographical context. For example, in American literature, EAs are most commonly referred to as paraeducators. In Ontario, however, these professionals are most commonly referred to as TAs or EAs. Thus for the purpose of this paper, the term EA will be used in place of these and other professional titles. Literature discussed throughout, however,

draws from a variety of countries that use some of these other professional titles.

The job of an EA is an extremely important one. EAs often work directly with students who have exceptionalities to help ensure that these students are working toward achieving the goals set out in their IEP. In many cases, the EA is in contact with the students who have exceptionalities more than any other educational staff member in the school. As a result, EAs can have a tremendous impact on these students' educational and social successes. In fact, Groom and Rose (2005) discovered that several key stakeholders in education identified EAs as central to the success of inclusive education. Some school-aged students without disabilities, however, have reported that EAs serve to further exclude students with disabilities by their mere presence (Katz, Porath, Bendu, & Epp, 2012). Despite these mixed findings, it is believed that with proper pre-service training and ongoing professional development, EAs can enhance inclusive education for all involved.

Educational Support Programs: Pre-service Education for EAs in Ontario

In recent years, Educational Support (ES) college diploma programs (previously referred to as Educational Assistant programs) have been developed and are now offered across Ontario at publicly funded colleges. These programs help to prepare prospective EAs for their future role in the special education team. The program name has changed from EA to ES because of a program standard that was developed by the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU, 2012a). This program standard has helped to guide the curriculum of the programs across the province. The EA/ES programs are relatively new in publically funded Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technologies (CAATs). For example, St. Clair College in Windsor, Ontario started an EA program

(now ES program) in 2006, with their first graduating class awarded EA diplomas at convocation in June of 2008. Through my searching strategies, utilizing keywords such as: CAAT, 'educational support programs', 'educational assistant programs', Ontar*, etc., I have not found any research on these EA/ES programs offered at CAATs across the province. It is imperative, however, that pre-service EAs' perspectives are represented in the literature. Once they begin their careers as EAs they will play an integral role in the future of special education in Ontario and beyond. In addition, the knowledge and skills obtained within these programs may profoundly impact pre-service EAs' educational philosophies and beliefs.

While the pre-service EA programs in Ontario are relatively new, the United States (US) has been concerned with EA training programs for quite some time. In fact, twenty years ago, Morgan, Hofmeister, and Ashbaker (1995) identified over thirty pre-service EA programs across the US. In addition, the No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) in the US recognizes the importance of proper training for EAs. In England pre-service educational assistant programs play an important role in professional status. EAs can take additional coursework to become a Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) (Burgess & Mayes, 2009). Like similar programs in other settings, the new ES programs offered in Ontario CAATs may influence prospective EAs' professional development and the overall quality of their work.

The Current Study

The literature has suggested that educators' attitudes towards inclusion can greatly impact the extent to which inclusionary practices are applied (Avramidis, et al., 2000;

Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Lawson, Parker, & Sikes, 2006). This correlation makes EAs' lived experiences and resulting attitudes toward inclusion all the more valuable to study. Through this narrative research inquiry, I investigate pre-service EAs' attitudes towards inclusion through the utilization of semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked to reflect upon their own experiences and resulting attitudes towards inclusive education. Engaging in this reflective activity allowed participants the opportunity to better understand themselves, their attitudes, and how this may influence their praxis. The way in which pre-service EAs view themselves personally and professionally may profoundly impact their attitudes towards inclusion. Consequently this may influence their future role in special education implementation. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into pre-service EAs' attitudes toward inclusion. Specifically, I investigated final year ES students' attitudes toward educational inclusion. This included second year students in a two-year ES program and students in a one-year intensive ES program at a CAAT in Ontario. The research question was: W*hat are final year ES students' attitudes toward inclusion?*

Positionality

When I was in the fifth grade I was diagnosed with epilepsy. I struggled in school because of my disability and medication side effects. Thankfully my family and a few great educators believed in me. As such, they put forth extra effort to help enhance my academic experience. Inspired by my personal experiences, I enrolled in a newly established EA program in 2007 at St. Clair College in Windsor, Ontario. I graduated from the program in 2009 with a new appreciation for education in general and for special education in particular. Shortly thereafter, I began working for a school board in

southwestern Ontario as an occasional (i.e., supply or substitute) EA. While working as an EA I completed my Honours degree in Disability Studies and my Bachelor of Education degree at the University of Windsor.

Through these experiences I have embraced the social model of disability and adopted an inclusive educational philosophy. Critical disability theory challenges traditional paradigms of disability that serve to systematically oppress people with disabilities (e.g., the medical model of disability). The social model of disability —a branch of critical disability theory—states that disability is a societal flaw due to barriers, not a flaw within the person (Oliver, 1996). Barriers are not only physical (e.g., stairs with no ramp option), but attitudinal barriers also exist that are often invisible. People with disabilities have historically been, and currently are subjected to prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination. This poor treatment of people with disabilities has recently been referred to as *ableism* or *disableism* (Harpur, 2012). Storey (2007) defines ableism as "The belief that it is better or superior not to have a disability than to have one and that it is better to do things in the way that nondisabled people do" (p. 56). My philosophy of educational inclusion recognizes that inclusion is a social justice issue and asserts that students have a right to be included with their peers in educational settings (Artiles et al., 2006).

After completing my honours degree in 2012, I started working as a part-time instructor in the same EA program I once attended as a student. The program has since changed its name to an ES program. I am currently the coordinator of this program on a part-time basis and a sessional instructor in the same Disability Studies program I once attended as a student. I will take over as the full-time coordinator of the ES program in

August of 2015. As a result of my personal, vocational, and educational experiences, I have developed a passion for special education. I acknowledge that my experiences and attitudes may bias my interpretation of participants' responses in this study. I also want to point out, however, that having been an EA/ES student, instructor, and coordinator will give me a great vantage point to better understand the participants' experiences.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The topics central to this narrative research inquiry are: Ontario colleges, EAs, inclusion, and attitudes. A brief review of these four constructs is necessary in order to fully contextualize and engage with the present study. These four topics will be discussed in a general fashion and in relation to the current research inquiry.

This review of the literature begins with a discussion of publicly funded colleges in Ontario. In this section a brief history of the Ontario college system is presented. In addition, current practices at CAATs are discussed. The next section presents current research on EAs. The need for EAs, their changing roles, and training implications are discussed. Following this is a discussion about inclusive education. The concept of inclusion is discussed and the academic, as well as social implications of inclusive education are addressed. Lastly, literature concerning attitudinal research is presented. Theories of attitude are discussed and pre-service teachers' attitudes, as well as EAs' attitudes toward inclusion are examined. Particular attention is given to the literature on in-service EAs because of the lack of studies investigating pre-service EAs' attitudes toward inclusion. Finally, gaps and problems in the extant literature will be discussed.

Ontario Colleges

Ontario colleges are distinctly different from other post-secondary institutions nearby (i.e., Ontario's universities and American community colleges). The history and evolution of Ontario colleges will be briefly described in order to offer a greater understanding of the educational context under which ES programs operate.

Publicly funded colleges in Ontario: CAATs. Higher education in Ontario consists of colleges and universities—two distinctly different post-secondary institutions.

Generally, colleges focus more on specific employability skills and the application of knowledge, whereas universities have a tendency for a more theoretical focus with an emphasis on research. The history of colleges in Canada is much more recent than that of universities. In fact, colleges did not become widespread in Canada until the 1960s and 70s (Dennison, 1995). In the 1960s, provincial governments recognized the need for a different kind of post-secondary education and thus, many Canadian colleges were born. Offering college education options alongside university options has helped to democratize higher education by making post-secondary education more accessible for those who cannot afford, get accepted, or fare well in university settings (Arvast, 2008**)**. Prior to the advent of colleges, high school graduates either went to university or entered the workforce. Initially, Canadian colleges emerged out of technical and vocational schools of the time (Skolnik, 2010). It has been said that the Canadian college system is one of the most diversified systems of colleges in the world, with each province/territory representing a separate system of colleges of its own (Dennison, 1995). I focus specifically on Ontario's system of publicly funded colleges (i.e., CAATs) because the participants of this study attended an ES program at a CAAT in Ontario.

Public colleges in Ontario are grouped together under the classification of CAATs and are governed by the MTCU. There are 24 CAATs across Ontario to meet a growing demand for students seeking a college education throughout the province. In fact, according to Colleges Ontario (2014), the 24 CAATs offer over 600 different programs. More programs are developed each year to prepare graduates for the ever-evolving and currently volatile job market. As a result, colleges play an important role in shaping the political and economical milieu of the province (Dennison, 1995). It is for this reason that

CAATs rely heavily on community partnerships. Each program establishes a Program Advisory Committee (PAC) (Litwin, 2012). The PACs are often made up of employers from their respective fields in order to ensure the curricula address the cutting edge of industry standards. This allows college programs to adapt to the most up-to-date industry innovations and helps to prepare students with the most current skills necessary for their field. Community collaboration is an important part of Ontario's system of colleges.

At its inception, Ontario colleges had a vision exclusively for technical education, whereas some other provinces (e.g., British Columbia and Alberta) opted to combine general and technical education (Skolnik, 2010). The landscape of Ontarian colleges, however, is currently in transition. With the passing of the Post-Secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act in 2000, colleges are now permitted to offer degree programs alongside their college diploma programs. This is a growing practice across the province with some colleges now offering degree programs. Grounded in the philosophy of technical education, these degree programs must be applied bachelor degrees (MTCU, 2012b).

Unfortunately, research in Ontario CAATs' programs conducted by college professors is scarce. The research appears especially absent when one considers the vast amount of research done in American college settings (Dennison, 1995; Lowry & Froese, 2001). In recent years, however, research ethics boards have been developed in many Ontarian colleges. There is a need for more applied research within CAAT programs (Fisher, 2006). Unfortunately, there is a major barrier to applied research at the college level. Many of the faculty members are experts in their respective fields with several years of industry experience. These instructors bring a great deal of knowledge and skills

in their given discipline, however, not all teaching faculty possess higher education degrees (e.g., Masters degree, Ph.D., Ed.D., etc.). These faculty, although a great asset to students, often do not have formal training in research ethics and methodologies necessary to take on applied research projects (Litwin, 2012). As an academic faculty member employed at a CAAT, this research endeavour and others like it represent the beginning of an era. This era promises an influx in college professors who possess both scholarly training and practical experiences conducting their own applied research in their respective fields. This research project may help me to better understand ES students' attitudes toward educational inclusion and may help to guide my instruction in order to better prepare ES students for Ontario's special education milieu.

Educational Assistants (EAs)

An explanation of the EA profession is essential in understanding the importance of pre-service training for EAs. The EA profession has evolved over time and EAs now play an important role in special education implementation. The role of an EA in the special education team, the need for pre-service training for EAs, and the effectiveness of EAs in special education are considered below.

The EA's role in special education. In the past, the role of an EA was to carry out mundane clerical tasks (e.g., photocopying, organizing, etc.) in order to help the classroom teacher be more efficient (Groom, 2006). Today, EAs play a central role in the implementation of special education services. As the EA profession goes through a dramatic role transformation, growing pains have accompanied these developments.

The literature indicates that there is general role confusion among EAs and teachers, meaning there is uncertainty between teachers and EAs regarding their roles and

job responsibilities. Angelides and colleagues (2009) pointed out that, "this confusion seems to have an impact on inclusive education as the stakeholders should clearly know their duties and obligations" (p. 84). This problem can be exacerbated by ill-defined job descriptions, poor teacher supervision, and a lack of appropriate training.

In a qualitative study, Egilson and Traustadottir (2009) found that the classroom teacher rarely stated EA roles and responsibilities explicitly. Some EAs in the study were asked to delivery instruction and make pedagogical decisions for students without teacher collaboration. EAs are supposed to be taking direction from the classroom teacher because teachers usually have more advanced credentials, but this study observed that EAs were often left to make educational decisions with little supervision. This is problematic because most EAs do not have the formal training to make pedagogical decisions in isolation. It was suggested that clarifying duties among teachers and EAs would enhance the quality and efficiency of special education delivery.

Educators may be experiencing role confusion because EAs have several duties, which change across contexts. Hansen and Jones (2013) discussed this at the Ontario Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC's) provincial conference in a presentation entitled *The Many Hats of the Educational Assistant: Developing an Effective Skill Set*. For example, an EA's duties might include supporting students academically during a math period, supervising students on yard duty, toileting students who are incontinent, feeding students with poor fine motor skills, and a host of other tasks. This may help to explain why there have been so many different professional names across time and cultures for EAs (Pittaway, 2002). It has also been suggested that role confusion may also create difficulty for EAs trying to develop their professional identities (Trent, 2014).

As the EA profession becomes more instructional, there is an increased need for EAs and teachers to work together as a team (Glazzard, 2011; Wilson & Bedford, 2008). The lack of collaboration between teachers and EAs has presented a barrier to special education implementation, mainly due to the difficulty in distinguishing between teacher and EA responsibilities (Angelides et al., 2009; Ratcliff, Jones, Vaden, Sheehan, & Hunt, 2011). Other barriers to a team approach are a lack of appreciation for EAs and a lack of recognition for the EA profession (Abbott, McConkey, & Dobbins, 2011). In fact, Fisher and Pleasants (2012) surveyed EAs and found that their number one professional concern was a lack of appreciation, followed closely by high turnover rates, and lack of expertise for required roles.

The effectiveness of EAs in special education. Some research has been done to investigate the influence EAs have on students with special education needs. The limited research that does exist has mixed findings. Some studies have asserted that EAs can have a negative impact on inclusion (de Boer, Pijl, Post, & Minnaert, 2013), whereas others acknowledge that EAs play an important role in inclusion (Abbott et al., 2011; Moran & Abbott, 2002). Egilson and Traustadottir (2009), as well as Angelides and colleagues (2009) found that EAs were promoting inclusion at times, but also unintentionally promoting exclusion at other times. For example, these studies showed that EAs contributed to more positive behaviour among students with exceptionalities, which helped to foster social relationships with classmates. At the same time however, students with exceptionalities sometimes became too dependent on their assigned EA and this resulted in their peers perceiving them negatively. The issue of overreliance seems to be one of the biggest concerns in the literature regarding the negative effects of EAs. To

address this issue, Giangreco, Broer, and Suter (2011) present alternatives to EA overreliance called the *Guidelines for Selecting Alternatives to Overreliance on Paraprofessionals (GSA)*. These ten guidelines offer practical suggestions for EAs in order to optimize their effectiveness within the special education team. In this study, they found that by utilizing the GSA, more students were able to be included in general education class and EAs were viewed as valued contributors to the special education team. In addition, the GSA reduced overreliance issues. Clearly, more research is needed on the effectiveness of EAs in special education (Saddler, 2014), but it seems that EAs are most effective when there is a structure and guidance provided within the special education team (Giangreco et al., 2011). In particular, more research is needed that measures EAs' effectiveness with students who have special education needs in inclusive settings (Giangreco, 2010).

The need for pre-service EA training. Giangreco and colleagues (2012) point out that if EAs have been ineffective thus far, it is not entirely their fault because of the unclear roles, lack of supervision, and lack of training. Unfortunately, many EAs lack the specific preparation necessary to carry out the new duties of the profession. As a result, some EAs feel inadequate in being able to fulfill their responsibilities. This does not come as a surprise, as most EAs report having little or no preparation for their EA roles (Wall, Davis, Winkler-Crowley, & White, 2005). On the other hand, training of EAs has lead to improvements in self-esteem and an increase in EAs' confidence for their role in special education (Rose & Forlin 2010). In one study, Breton (2010) found that EAs felt they did not have enough formal training prior to beginning their work as EAs or enough in-service training for their current roles as EAs. There has been a general call for better

in-service and pre-service training for EAs in the literature and many EAs have indicated their desire for further education in their field (Abbott et al., 2011; Giangreco et al., 2012; Glazzard, 2011; Moran & Abbott, 2002).

Economically, EAs are less expensive to hire in Ontario than Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) certified teachers because EAs usually have fewer credentials. This fact reflects a social justice issue for students with exceptionalities that was expressed by Giangreco, Suter, and Doyle (2010) when they pointed out that, "we continue to assign the least qualified personnel to students who present the most challenging learning and behavioral characteristics" (p. 51). The role of an EA is changing and until recently there has not been formal pre-service training for these positions.

Reflecting the importance of the new role EAs play in special education, there has been an increase in research on EAs (see the literature review by Giangreco, et al., 2010). It appears, however, that there is still a paucity of research on pre-service EA training, probably because standardized training is often not mandated. Even in Ontario, where pre-service EA programs exist with a provincial program standard, EA hiring practices do not restrict employers to hire ES graduates exclusively. Research studies that have investigated EAs' pre-service training have largely done so by asking participants to reflect on their pre-service experiences retrospectively (Breton, 2010; Burgess & Mayes, 2009). In a retrospective study done by Burgess and Mayes (2009), EAs indicated that they valued their pre-service training. Participants believed their training had prepared them with the proper theoretical understandings in order to apply practical skills on the job. The current study differs insofar as the participants are currently pre-service EAs.

If EAs are expected to be key stakeholders in special education, they need to be

adequately prepared and supported through ongoing development. In Ontario, clear

employment criterion has been suggested for EAs (OME, 2011). One such suggestion is

that EA hires must have relevant post-secondary education. To meet this need, many

Ontario CAATs are now offering diploma pre-service EA programs (i.e., ES programs).

ES programs may address some of the professional barriers identified by better preparing

college students for a career as an EA. Currently in Ontario, approximately 10 of the 24

colleges offer an ES program on a part-time (e.g., Fanshawe College—still operating as

an EA program) or full-time basis (e.g., Mohawk College), with online (e.g.,

Confederation College), and accelerated options (e.g., Sheridan College). As EAs are

asked to take on their new expanded role in special education, there is a clear need for

adequate pre-service and in-service training. ES programs help to address this need at the

pre-service level in Ontario. In Ontario, a program standard for ES programs (i.e., pre-

service training) was established in 2012, which has helped to regulate the curriculum of

ES programs across the province (MTCU, 2012a).

In the ES program standard there are nine vocational learning outcomes (VLOs)

that guide the curriculum for all the ES programs in the province. Individual CAATs

develop their own courses so students can demonstrate they have achieved the nine VLOs

in the provincial program standard. In addition, there are elements of performance for

each VLO. The concept of inclusion is not explicit in any of the nine VLOs; however,

inclusion is discussed as an element of performance for VLO two and VLO five. VLO

two states, "the graduate has reliability demonstrated the ability to develop and

implement strategies to promote and support positive school climates that contribute to a

safe, caring and secure educational setting" (MTCU, 2012a, p. 8). The element of

performance for this VLO that discusses inclusion states, "promote an inclusive, equitable, respectful and supportive educational setting" (MTCU, 2012a, p. 8). VLO five states, "the graduate has reliably demonstrated the ability to lead by example to promote empathetic, positive and pro-social behaviour in all learners to facilitate the development of social competence in learners with exceptionalities in accordance with their IEPs" (MTCU, 2012a, p. 11). The element of performance for this VLO that discusses inclusion states, "support, respect and model a culture of inclusivity among all learners to facilitate the development of social competence in learners with exceptionalities in accordance with their IEPs" (MTCU, 2012a, p. 11).

Educational Inclusion

Inclusion is central to this research inquiry. This is a highly researched and controversial topic in the literature. A brief discussion will offer a basic understanding of this concept. Academic and social implications of inclusion for students with and without disabilities are discussed.

Understanding educational inclusion in Ontario. There are many factors that impact our understanding of the inclusionary model of special education and what it means to be inclusive. Glazzard (2011) states, "…there is a lack of shared understanding of what constitutes inclusion" (p. 57) and Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden (2002) state that inclusion is "…a bewildering concept which can have a variety of interpretations and applications" (p. 158). For this reason, a universal definition of inclusion does not exist. At the most basic level, however, inclusive education means, "…educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms…" (Heward, 2013, p.71). To assert that inclusion is merely a place, however, would be inaccurate and inequitable. Inclusion has

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proven to encompass much more.

In 2009 the Ontario government introduced the "Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy" in an effort to make schools more inclusive for everyone. This initiative recognizes that inclusive education is "education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students, [where] students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings and the broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected" (OME, 2009). Initiatives that support educational inclusion have become more commonplace in Canadian settings. As such, there has been an influx of research on educational inclusion from a variety of perspectives. For example, the Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education (CRCIE) (2015a) is:

> A network of stakeholders who provide a uniquely Canadian view of inclusive education. The partnership is comprised of people with expertise in leadership, research methodologies, and theoretical approaches; they have experience working with diverse partners and stakeholders, and employ a range of approaches and contexts for knowledge mobilization.

The CRCIE points out that successful inclusion is made up of (1) supportive environments, (2) positive relationships, (3) feelings of competence, and (4) opportunities to participate (2015b). Specht and Bennett (2013), who are members of the CRCIE, also suggest that inclusion occurs when all students feel that they belong and are valued members of their class. Despite some general agreement among likeminded scholars, there is still great debate over how inclusion ought to be defined and implemented (Bennett, 2009).

It was Franklin Bobbitt (2004) who stated, "[Education] has the function of training every citizen, man or woman, not for knowledge about citizenship, but for proficiency in citizenship…"(p.10). If indeed we view schools as a microcosm for society, it seems absolutely essential to include students with disabilities in general education classrooms. In these classes all students can have equitable and diverse learning opportunities to develop as proficient citizens that may contribute positively to a socially inclusive society. In *Pathways to Inclusion,* Lord and Hutchison (2011) assert that, "…social inclusion is designed to create opportunities and conditions for citizenship." (p. 13). In theory, inclusion seems like an excellent idea, however, many have questioned the academic and social implications of inclusive education for students with and without disabilities.

Implications of an inclusionary approach to special education. Including students with disabilities in a general education classroom with their same-age peers is a relatively new concept. Since inclusion has become more commonplace, researchers have been interested in the implications of inclusion academically and socially for students with and without disabilities.

Academic implications of inclusion: Students without disabilities. Many arguments against inclusion have focused on the students without disabilities. Ruijs, Van der Veen, and Peetsma (2010) pointed out that parents and professionals were initially concerned that including students with disabilities of varying diagnoses and severities would adversely impact the quality of education for students without disabilities. There was concern that classroom teachers might have less time for students without disabilities because of the great deal of attention that would go toward students with exceptionalities.

There was also a concern that the general level of education would be less rigorous in order to cater to the students with lower aptitudes. In addition, others believed that students with disabilities might be a distraction to the students without disabilities and that students without disabilities may learn aberrant behaviours from students with disabilities.

Although, some of these concerns seem reasonable, a review of the literature by Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, & Kaplan (2007) found that inclusive education does not have a negative impact on academic achievement and in some cases students without disabilities in inclusive classrooms report higher academic achievement than those who are not in inclusive classrooms. For example, Gandhi (2007) found that students without disabilities educated in inclusive classrooms had essentially the same reading achievement as students in non-inclusive classrooms and Hartfield found that the same was true for mathematic achievement (2009). In addition, parents have reported that their children (without disabilities) are learning important lessons outside of the curriculum about accepting individual differences, as well as, learning compassion and sensitivity towards others (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2010).

Academic implications of inclusion: Students with disabilities. When considering inclusion, academic achievement of students with special educational needs has also been of great concern. For students who cannot be fully included into the general education class all day, withdrawal programs exist that take students out of their class for part of the day in order to provide specialized and individualized instruction. Kauffman and colleagues (2002) asserted that separate learning environments might be necessary for many students with severe emotional and behavioural disorders. In addition, some

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parents of students with disabilities believe that an inclusive class is not an appropriate placement for their child, most however, prefer an inclusive class. According to a study by Elkins, van Kraayenoord, and Jobling (2002) most parents supported inclusion by reporting that an inclusive class would be ideal. Despite this debate over inclusive and self-contained classes, research suggests, in general, that students' with disabilities academic performance is slightly more positive in inclusive classes compared to non-inclusive classes (de Graaf, van Hove, & Haveman, 2013; Mason, 2013; Ruijs, & Peetsma, 2009). It is important to note, however, that many factors can impact student performance and this can vary from one student to the next.

  Social implications of inclusion. Giroux (1978) presented the idea that schools are " . . . agents of socialization . . ." (p. 148). Certainly, schools are social places where "in-groups" and "out-groups" are formulated. Unfortunately, students with disabilities have been historically marginalized and often become a part of the out-group. In fact, research indicates that students without disabilities are less likely to befriend their peers with disabilities, as compared to their peers without disabilities (Avramidis, 2013; de Boer et al., 2013; Pijl, Frostad, & Flem, 2008). In addition, students with special education needs are more likely to be involved in bullying, both as a victim and as a bully (Swearer, Wang, Maag, Siebecker, & Frerichs, 2012). Poor socialization for students with disabilities can create major barriers to inclusive education. Some promising research indicates that the more experience students have with peers who have exceptionalities, the more likely they are to be accepting of inclusive practices (Cairns & McClatchey, 2013). Nevertheless, students with exceptionalities continue to have difficulty being included socially compared to their peers without disabilities.

Enhancing the attitudes of students without disabilities toward their peers with disabilities may have a long lasting impact. In a longitudinal study, Rillotta and Nettelbeck (2007) were able to enhance students' attitudes toward disability through an eight-week intervention program called the *Awareness of Disability Program*. This program focused on providing students with knowledge about disability. The positive changes in attitude they observed were still evident when measured again eight years later. In addition, de Boer and colleagues (2013) found that attitudinal changes enhanced the likelihood of friendships being forged among classmates with and without disabilities. Further research in this field is required in order to more fully understand the social relationships between students with and without disabilities because "relationship building is one vehicle for implementing the inclusion process." (Lord & Hutchison, 2011, p. 14).

Attitudinal Research

Some basic theoretical understandings of attitudinal research will be discussed. I will utilize some of these theories in an effort to better understand pre-service EAs' attitudes toward inclusion. In particular, I will discuss participants' responses in reference to the three dimensions of the tripartite theory of attitude by pointing out which dimension(s) of attitude the participants' responses fall into. Examining educators' attitudes toward inclusion is important because attitudes may have an impact on behaviour.

Attitudinal theories. Basic conceptualizations of attitude have been debated over the last century. Explaining attitude as a construct has fallen into two main categories: (1) one-dimensional models and (2) multidimensional models. Unidimensional theories

assert that attitude is a singular construct and is often interchanged with beliefs (Fishbein & Raven, 1962). Multidimensional theories, however, conceptualize overall attitude as the summation of two or more factors.

Among the multidimensional theories of attitude, the tripartite theory is one of the most prominent (Ostrom, 1969; Breckler, 1984). This view defines attitude as a combination of one's affect (i.e., feelings), behaviour (i.e., actions), and cognition (i.e., thoughts and beliefs). Another multidimensional view of attitude excludes behaviour as a factor because it has been argued that attitudes and actual behaviours do not always correlate (Ajzen, 2001; Corey, 1937; LaPiere, 1934). This point has not gone uncontested however, as cognitive dissonance theory supports that attitudes often manifest as behaviours that accurately reflect our attitudes (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). In addition, the theory of Planned Behaviour links behaviours and attitudes. This theory asserts that people's behaviours are often a reflection of their behavioural intentions and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 2001).

Despite some technical disagreements and mixed findings among scholars, some generic definitions of attitude have been asserted over the years. For example, Myers and Smith (2009) define attitude as "a general and enduring evaluation of some person, object, or issue along a continuum from positive to negative" (p. 79). In addition, early on in attitudinal research, Allport and Shanck (1936) asserted that the development of one's attitudes is a combination of both nurture (i.e., culture, upbringing, etc.) and nature (i.e., biological factors). Building off of the influence of nurture, Mere Exposure theory states that one's attitude toward a person or object can be enhanced through exposure to that person or object for an extended period of time (Zajonc, 2001). In the context of this

research study, I hope to ascertain a greater understanding of the way in which an ES program (a shared experience of all participants) and other lived experiences have shaped ES students' attitudes toward inclusionary education.

Pre-service teachers' and EAs' attitudes toward inclusion. Although research supports that both students with and without disabilities can benefit academically and socially from inclusive education, the effectiveness of an inclusive classroom can be largely dictated by educators' attitudes toward an inclusionary approach. Unfortunately, meta-analyses done by Avramidis and Norwich (2002) and more recently by de Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2011) have found, in general, teachers hold negative or neutral attitudes toward full-inclusion and slightly more positive attitudes toward partial inclusion. Several factors may impact a teacher's attitude toward inclusion (e.g., years of experience, class size, sex of the teacher, specialized training, etc.). In order for inclusion to be implemented to the fullest extent possible for all students, some of these attitudinal barriers must be addressed. There have been no studies found to date that measure pre-service EAs' attitudes toward inclusion. For this reason, I look to the literature on pre-service teachers and in-service EAs.

Pre-service teachers attitudes toward inclusion. Due to the lack of literature on pre-service EAs' attitudes toward inclusion, similar studies on pre-service teachers are examined. Together with EAs, teachers play an important role in special education implementation. In fact, Hemmings and Woodcock (2011) found that pre-service teachers perceived EAs and other support staff to be essential for inclusive practices to be successful, but overall they felt poorly prepared to teach students with special education needs. The researchers followed up with the participants and found that by the end of

their pre-service teaching program, the student teachers felt more confident in their ability to apply an inclusive philosophy and placed less of an emphasis on support staff. This may reflect a bigger trend that was discussed earlier. That is, in special education, teachers and EAs are not prepared to work alongside one another. In a recent Canadian study, however, Ryan (2009) found that pre-service teachers value time for preparation as one of the most important factors for the success of inclusion, rather than personnel support. Overall, these pre-service teachers held positive attitudes toward inclusion, but may not have been utilizing the full special education team in practice. This may indicate that pre-service teachers feel that the onus for providing inclusive education falls entirely on them, rather than adopting a team approach with EAs. Bennett (2009) recognizes that while it is important for teachers to take on ownership of the students with exceptionalities in their class, it is equally important for teachers to work alongside EAs in the special education team.

There are several factors that can have an impact on whether or not an educator has positive or negative attitudes toward inclusive education (Costello & Boyle, 2013). In a review of the literature, Avramidis and Norwich (2002) discuss several factors that impact teachers' attitudes towards inclusion (e.g., disability type, gender, years of experience, grade level, etc.). Attitudes towards inclusion vary from culture to culture, as well as from one individual to another. It would appear that two of the biggest factors investigated in the literature that seems to enhance attitudes toward educational inclusion are disability knowledge and experiences (Loreman, Sharma, & Forlin, 2013).

In an international study, Sharma, Forlin and Loreman (2008) measured 603 pre-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusion from Australia, Canada, Hong Kong and

Singapore using a researcher-developed scale. They found that participants' attitudes were much better at the conclusion of the program compared to the start. They concluded that knowledge obtained in the program had influenced their attitudes toward inclusion. The researchers explained, " . . . that for teachers to be effective catalysts of inclusion they need to be adequately prepared during their pre-service training" (p. 774). Similarly, Ajuwon and colleagues (2012) measured pre-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusion using a modified version of the *Pre-Service Inclusion Survey*. In this study attitude scores were also measured pre- and post- coursework—at the beginning and end of a mandatory special education course. Pre-service teachers' attitudes toward teaching students with special education needs increased significantly at post-test measures.

Like knowledge, experience also seems to have a positive impact on pre-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. For example, Swain, Nordness, and Leader-Janssen (2012) found that student teachers that had had an opportunity to work in an inclusive class alongside special education teachers had the biggest developments in their attitudes toward inclusion compared to their classmates without this experience. This is in line with Mere Exposure Theory discussed earlier (Zajonc, 2001). It is believed that through extended exposure in an inclusive class, student teachers (or EAs for that matter) will develop more positive attitudes toward inclusive education. Ideally these positive attitudes will translate to positive behaviours and result in inclusive practices being utilized on placements and in future practice. This attitude to behaviour connection points out the importance of studying attitudes toward inclusion. Attitudes can profoundly impact the extent to which inclusionary ideals are strived for in praxis (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Costello & Boyle, 2013).

EAs' attitudes toward inclusion. Very few studies measuring EAs' attitudes toward inclusion have been conducted to date, and no studies were found measuring pre-service EAs' attitudes toward inclusion. This is particularly interesting when one considers the vast amount of literature on teachers' and pre-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Through an extensive searching strategy, six peer-reviewed studies were found on EAs' attitudes toward inclusion published in the last ten years. Two of these articles were completed with the same set of data by one research team. These six articles measure some aspect of EAs' attitudes toward inclusion (e.g., understandings of, feelings toward, etc.). Among the studies found, most of them measured EAs' attitudes in addition to those of teachers' and other educational stakeholders' attitudes; only two focused on EAs exclusively (Mackenzie, 2011; Symes and Humphrey, 2011).

Lawson and colleagues (2006) examined 60 EAs' and teachers' stories about educational inclusion. The researchers visited one primary and one secondary school in southwest England three times each during the 2003/2004 school year. Teachers and EAs were interviewed and encouraged to tell their stories based on their lived experiences. The data consisted of sixty stories from the two schools. The researchers also included their own stories in the data because they too had practical experiences in special education settings. As such this study was a narrative and autobiographical inquiry. The researchers acknowledged that the EA voice has been largely underrepresented in the literature.

Participants had difficulty defining inclusion, which is not surprising given the lack of a standard definition for inclusion. In fact, one EA participant did not feel it was necessary to have a view toward inclusion by stating, " . . . I don't have to have a view

because I feel, you know, I come here and a teacher tells me what to do so it doesn't matter what my view is" (p. 61). This may lend support to the notion that teachers and EAs are ill equipped to work alongside one another. Ideally the EA and teacher should be working together with shared visions and goals. Also, some EAs need to develop more of a professional identity as an important and contributing member of the special education team.

Participants in the study by Lawson and colleagues (2006) discussed their experience inside and outside the school with people who have disabilities. These experiences were common among participants and seemed to have a strong influence on their attitudes toward educational inclusion. In general EAs in this study had mostly positive attitudes toward inclusion. In addition, most EAs and teachers in the study discussed inclusion in terms of their personal contributions to educational support for students with special education needs.

The same research team (as discussed above) decided to take a closer look at six of their participants' stories from their earlier study (Lawson et al., 2006). Sikes, Lawson, and Parker (2007) included an expanded discussion of the methodological approach employed by the researchers. They asserted that self-awareness through reflection of one's own stories based on lived experiences is an important step toward developing socially just pedagogies. This may be particularly important for participants in current study as pre-service EAs. Upon analyzing the data more closely, Sikes and colleagues (2007) found that EAs generally support inclusion in theory, but express concerns about the implementation of inclusion in practice—a phenomenon that they have coined as "*yes, but*". For example, *yes*, I support inclusion, *but* we don't have enough funding to

support it.

In another research study, Glazzard (2011) conducted a focus group with teachers and EAs at a primary school in Northern England. He found that participants' attitudes toward inclusion were mixed among teachers and EAs (i.e., positive, negative, and ambivalent). The researcher discussed the importance of EAs and teachers developing a unified understanding of inclusion in order to implement educational inclusion in the classroom effectively. Glazzard (2011) acknowledged that attitudinal barriers that exist among some educators must be addressed because poor attitudes toward inclusion can impact the extent to which inclusive strategies are utilized. Although teachers' and EAs' understanding of educational inclusion were not unified, through the focus group, Glazzard was able to identify several factors that could help to enhance the effectiveness of an inclusive approach. Educators reported the importance of one-on-one support and teamwork between teachers and EAs. On the other hand, participants reported that compensatory special education policies, parental resistance, and lack of resources posed barriers to an inclusionary approach.

In another study that addressed EAs' attitudes toward educational inclusion, Mackenzie (2011) conducted interviews or focus groups with 13 EAs who were working in inclusive classrooms in England. Ten EAs participated in focus groups and three participants were individually interviewed. This study was interested in EAs' attitudes toward inclusion and how their life histories have impacted these attitudes. In particular, the researcher was interested in the EAs' experiences working in an inclusive classroom. Mackenzie found that EAs' attitudes toward inclusion were mixed and that even though they generally supported inclusion, they had reservations about its implementation.

Mackenzie makes a connection to the "yes, but" phenomenon presented by Sikes and colleagues (2007) by paying homage to their study in the title of her study—'*Yes, but . . .': Rhetoric, reality and resistance in teaching assistants' experiences of inclusive education*. In addition, EA participants reported that they believe they play a central role in successful inclusion. However, participants resented the fact that EAs' work is often considered by many in the school to be of low status and unintellectual compared to the work of teachers. Not surprisingly, EAs were uniformly unhappy with their current working relationships with their assigned classroom teachers.

In a phenomenological study, Symes and Humphrey (2011) conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 EAs who were working with students who had a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the southwest of England. The researchers were interested in examining EAs' attitudes toward inclusion of students with ASD specifically. EAs reported positive attitudes toward inclusive education. EA participants also acknowledged that positive attitudes toward inclusion were essential for inclusion to be successful. In addition, participants identified access to experts, communication, and staff awareness of ASD to be additional factors that facilitate inclusion. The special education needs coordinator and fellow EAs (particularly EAs with experience) were seen as experts by the participants. The EA participants felt that these facilitating factors had to start with a positive school culture, where EAs could feel comfortable asking questions and working together in the special education team. EAs in this study described a positive school culture as one with strong leadership, collaboration, and respect. The EAs in this study reported feeling respected by their colleagues, which differs from some of the other studies discussed in this section.

Most recently, Bennett and Gallagher (2013) measured attitudes of EAs, teachers, parents, peers, community employers, and job coaches at all seven high schools in one school board in Ontario, Canada. They sought to discover stakeholders' attitudes toward educational and community inclusion. This was the only study of the six studies that measured EAs' attitudes toward education inclusion that utilized a quantitative approach. Sixty-seven high school EAs' attitudes toward inclusion were measured using a Likert scale questionnaire developed from two existing metrics. Although this study measures several EAs' attitudes, the researchers acknowledged that generalization from this study was limited because all participants were drawn from only one school board. This may, however, point to the importance of a school board wide approach to educational inclusion. They found that EAs and teachers had positive attitudes toward educational inclusion, but were less optimistic about the community outcomes of inclusion compared to parents and students with exceptionalities. The researchers conceded that the positive attitudes discovered might have resulted from the overall inclusive philosophy of the school board. By examining the attitudes of many stakeholders, this study emphasized the importance of a team approach to special education. In addition, this study discussed the role of secondary schools' special education programming in transitioning students with exceptionalities from high school to the world of work.

Summary and Rationale for Current Research

This review of the literature discusses the context of ES programs (i.e., Ontario CAATs) from which the current study will draw participants. Following is an exploration of the evolving role of the EA profession within special education team. Next, the effectiveness, appropriateness, and even the definition of what constitutes educational

inclusion are discussed. Lastly, current literature that has investigated in-service teachers', pre-service teachers', and in-service EAs' attitudes toward educational inclusion are examined.

Inclusion is a highly debated phenomenon among scholars and educational professionals. This literature review lends support to the idea that inclusionary education is beneficial for students with and without disabilities in academic and social domains. It is important that educators develop positive attitudes toward inclusion, rather than ambivalent or negative attitudes. This is important because the extent to which inclusionary approaches are utilized can be strongly impacted by educators' attitudes toward inclusion. Pre-service EA programs in Ontario CAATs (i.e., ES programs) provide prospective EAs with a unique opportunity to develop their educational philosophies from their coursework and field placement opportunities. In addition, Ajuwon and colleagues (2012) suggest that " . . . pre-service training may be the optimum time to address educators' concerns and change any negative attitudes about inclusive education" (p. 101). Pre-service experiences in conjunction with students' lived experiences may strongly impact their attitudes toward inclusion and subsequent effectiveness in implementing inclusionary approaches.

The current study addresses several gaps in the literature. First, there are very few studies that examine EAs' attitudes toward educational inclusion, only one on which was conducted in Ontario in the last ten years. In addition, there is a need for more applied research in CAATs. In particular, there is a need for research in ES programs since no existing research in these programs has been found. This narrative research inquiry took into account the lived experiences of pre-service EAs (both inside and outside of the ES

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program). This allowed me to address my research question: *What are final year ES students' attitudes towards inclusion?*

The majority of studies reviewed on pre-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusion used a quantitative design, in which participants indicated their extent of approval or disapproval with statements about inclusive education on a Likert scale. Hemmings and Woodcock (2011) and McCray & McHatton (2011), however, employed open-ended questions to gain insight into pre-service teacher's attitudes towards inclusion. These studies point out that utilizing a qualitative approach allows the participants to respond in ways that may be unknown to the researcher, thus allowing for more rich and personally relevant data to emerge. Following this trend, the majority of research on EAs' attitudes toward inclusion has taken a qualitative approach (i.e., five of the six studies). This is unusual in the larger context of attitudinal research on educational inclusion. Lawson and colleagues (2006) acknowledge that, "the dominant research tool in these studies [attitudinal research]…continues to be Likert-type scales and inventories offering pre-defined categories or statements, with respondents frequently being forced to make bi-polar choices" (p. 57). In a literature review Avramidis and Norwich (2002) recommend that, "future research would benefit from employing alternative methods, such as life history, narrative or autobiography, to examine…attitudes [toward educational inclusion]" (p.144). Avramidis and Norwich (2002) develop their idea further by stating that, "studies of this nature [qualitative] carry the potential of deepening our understanding of the complexities of inclusion (p.144). Thus, narrative inquiry has been adopted for the purpose of the current study. Data will be collected through a demographic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The qualitative research

studies that measure EAs' attitudes toward inclusion most closely resemble the current

research endeavour. These studies investigated working EAs' attitudes toward inclusion,

whereas the current study examines pre-service EAs' attitudes toward inclusion.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Selection Criteria

  Selecting a CAAT. The selection criteria started at the institutional level. This research study is interested in pre-service EAs' education/preparation carried out in publicly funded Ontarian CAATs. In Ontario there are 24 CAATs. After going through a very specific set of selection criteria I was left with two CAATs with ES programs that had a potential pool of final year ES student participants. I planned to move forward and interview participants from these two colleges. After initial REB feedback, however, it was determined the ES program I coordinate should not be included due to the power dynamics between potential participants and myself. This left me with one CAAT, which had two ES programs (i.e., a two-year program and a one-year intensive program). In order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, a pseudonym will be assigned to the college from which participants were recruited. Throughout this paper I will refer to the CAAT that is participating in this study as *Moxie College*. Participants for this study were drawn from the two ES programs at Moxie College

  Selecting participants. For the purposes of this study, I was only interested in final year students in the two ES programs at Moxie College. This included second year students in the two-year program (i.e., approximately 30 students) and students in the one-year intensive program (i.e., approximately 35 students). In the two-year program, the second-year students had gone through the majority of the program at the time of data collection (i.e., winter semester of 2015). As a result, they have had more experience with their coursework and through field placements. It is believed that second year students have had more of an opportunity to reflect upon their experiences in comparison to first

year students in the two-year program. In addition, as part of the admission criteria, students in the one-year intensive ES program must have had either a significant amount of related experience in the field of special education or have graduated from a related post-secondary diploma or degree program. Arguably, these two groups of students have had an opportunity to develop their own attitudes toward inclusion from their lived experiences (inside and outside of the ES program).

Recruitment

The coordinator of the ES programs at Moxie College agreed to post a recruitment message on the students e-learning website in the winter semester of 2015. The letters of consent were attached in the email if students wanted to learn more about the project before volunteering to participate. The letters of consent outline the purpose, responsibilities, risks, and benefits of the study. ES students were encouraged to contact me via email if they were interested in participating. Students were given over a month to decide if they were interested in being interviewed for this study. Several reminders from the ES coordinator were sent to students during this time period. This included three announcements on the programs' e-learning website, three mass emails to all final year students, and both cohorts of interest were reminded in class twice. This resulted in four participants requesting an interview. Four participants was a good number for this narrative inquiry study because it allowed me to focus deeply on each participant's lived experiences. Creswell explains that, "narrative research is best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single individual or the lives of a small number of individuals" (2013, p. 74). In addition, I noticed some data saturation among the four participants, which gives further support to the number of participants interviewed

(Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Despite some indicators of a sufficient sized sample, I must concede that a larger, more diversified sample would have been ideal.

Research Design

Narrative inquiry was employed as a research design. As such, I was interested in how participants have constructed their attitudes toward educational inclusion from their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). Participants' experiences were central to this research study, especially their experiences in the ES program. Students in the two-year program took a course specifically on inclusion, whereas, the students in the intensive program did not. The coordinator of the ES programs informed me that future cohorts would not be taking a class specifically on inclusion because it has been removed from their program chart. The faculty in the ES programs at Moxie College decided inclusion should be discussed across all coursework rather than studied in isolation. In addition, field placements will likely give students exposure to this concept as inclusion becomes increasingly important in Ontario's special education system.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) emphasize that, "narrative inquiry is increasingly used in studies on educational experience" (p. 2). This study gave a voice to pre-service EAs in the educational literature for the first time in Ontario. Participants were asked to recollect and share stories from their lives both inside and outside of the ES program. I was able to interpret participants' responses while seeking clarification throughout the process. This methodology was chosen because I was interested in how participants had conceptualized their attitudes toward educational inclusion. In addition, I wanted to examine how ES students' lived experiences have impacted their attitudes toward educational inclusion.

Instrumentation. Data was gathered from participants using a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A) and semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B for guiding questions). The demographic questionnaire was designed in order to obtain basic information about participants (e.g., gender, age, highest level of education, experience with educational inclusion, etc.). In addition to the demographic questionnaire, a series of questions were developed in order to guide the semi-structured interviews. Demographic information helped to contextualize participants' lived experiences, which can be an important part of understanding one's lived experiences (McCormack, 2004). The demographic questionnaire asked participants about their experiences inside and outside of the ES program. Due to the semi-structured nature of these interviews, prompts were used to elicit storytelling from participants. In some cases, information from the demographic questionnaire was used as a prompt during the interview to elicit more detailed and narrative responses. Prompts were deliberate to allow participants the opportunity to formulate, share, and reflect upon their stories in a natural way. By collecting data through this procedure, I was able address my main research question—*What are final year ES students' attitudes toward educational inclusion?* Semi-structured interview questions were developed with some guidance from studies that had similar research inquires in the literature and had published their interview questions in their articles (see Glazzard 2011; Hemmings & Woodcock, 2011; McCray & McHatton, 2011).

The data were collected on the campus of Moxie College in a private study room near the library for three of the four participants and one participant requested a Skype interview. On average, the demographic questionnaire took about ten minutes and the

interview took approximately an hour and twenty minutes to complete. The total time was about an hour and a half for each participant. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, I took anecdotal notes on nonverbal cues (e.g., body language, facial expressions, etc.) in order to get a better understanding of participants' stories. Once transcriptions were complete, participants were contacted. Participants had the opportunity to read over the transcriptions to ensure their accuracy to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Carlson (2010) points out that this member checking procedure " . . . is often a single event that takes place only with the verification of transcripts or early interpretations" (p. 1105). The member checking process helped to ensure that I did not misrepresent the views of the participants. In some cases the participants added information to the transcripts to further clarify, but all four participants agreed that the transcriptions were complete, accurate, and reflected their true attitudes toward educational inclusion. At this time participants gave me their consent to continue on with the analysis of the data. The procedures described above have been employed in an effort to address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004).

Participants

Four students in their final year of an ES program at Moxie College participated in this study. The four participants were all female with an average age of 43.75 (age ranged from 34 to 49). As such, all the participants were mature students who had a great deal of life experience to draw from. Three of the four participants were in the one-year intensive ES program and one participant was in her second year of the two-year ES program. In addition, three of the four participants indicated that they had relatives or

friends with disabilities. All four participants indicated that they had worked in an education setting or in the disability service field in some capacity prior to enrolling in Moxie College's ES program. All four participants had experience in inclusive classrooms on their field placements in the ES program. Three of the four participants had completed university degrees and one participant had no formal education outside of the ES program. In order to protect the participants' identities, all of them have been assigned pseudonyms.

April. April is a forty-three year old woman and is enrolled in Moxie College's one-year intensive ES program. Prior to enrolling in the ES program she completed a degree in History from the University of Toronto. She has a distant relative with a disability, but reported that she was interested in the field of special education prior to this relative being born. Her field placement in the ES program was in an inclusive classroom with two boys who had ASD (i.e., one low-functioning and one high-functioning). Prior to her experiences in the ES program, April worked as a teacher at a private school. She had students with exceptionalities in her class who had IEPs and these students were included in the general education classroom.

Anne. Anne is a forty-nine year old woman and is in the second year of Moxie College's two-year ES program. The ES program is her first formal post-secondary education experience. Anne's father had a physical disability and her daughter has been identified as gifted. Anne also has a good friend who has a child with a disability. Her placements in the ES program have all been in inclusive classrooms. Her first field placement was in a Junior Kindergarten class working with students who had ASD and developmental disabilities. At her next placement she worked with students who were

diagnosed with ASD in a high school. In her third and final placement she worked with a variety of students in different elementary grade levels. These students had behavioural disorders, learning disabilities, ASD, and cerebral palsy. Prior to her experiences in the ES program, Anne worked for over 25 years as a bus driver for students with special needs.

Kelly. Kelly is a forty-nine year old woman and is enrolled in Moxie College's one-year intensive ES program. Prior to enrolling in the ES program she completed a degree in English at McMaster University. In addition, she is currently taking online courses on inclusion through Athabasca University. She has a son and two brothers who have all been diagnosed with a learning disability. Through her placement experiences, Kelly has had experience in both inclusive and self-contained classes. In the inclusive class she worked within an elementary school with children who had learning disabilities, ASD, and behavioural disorders. In the self-contained class, she worked in a high school with youth who were medically fragile, low-functioning, and high needs. Outside of the ES program, Kelly had six years of volunteer experience in elementary and middle school settings.

Grace. Grace is a thirty-four year old woman and is enrolled in Moxie College's one-year intensive ES program. Prior to enrolling in the ES program she completed a degree in Psychology from Athabasca University, a Human Behaviour Certificate from Humber College, and a General Arts and Science Diploma from Sheridan College. She did not report having a disability, a close friend with a disability, or a family member with a disability. Grace's placement experiences in the ES program have all been in inclusive classrooms. Her first placement was in Junior Kindergarten with a non-verbal

student diagnosed with a developmental disability. Her second placement was in grades three and six working with students who were diagnosed with cerebral palsy. Prior to her experiences in the ES program, Grace worked as a support worker with Family Respite Services for sixteen years and was a tutor for over ten years.

Data Analysis

The interview questions helped to elicit responses from participants. From these responses, I was able to compile a set of data that was then analyzed for themes. Thematic analysis was employed, specifically the use of inductive analysis—a technique of coding data from interviews in an organic way (i.e., without predetermined categories) (Braun & Clark, 2002). Transcribed interviews were read over several times in order to locate patterns in the data (McCormack, 2000). From these patterns, larger themes emerged (discussed in detail in the discussion chapter). I was able to draw on my personal experiences to better understand participants' responses to the interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). My experiences were able to assist me in interpreting participants' experiences because I myself have experienced the phenomenon of interest (i.e., I been a student in an EA/ES program). In addition, I am currently a coordinator of an ES program at a CAAT in Ontario and have a strong knowledge of what ES students experience within these programs. The member checking procedure (discussed above) helped to ensure I was not clouded by bias.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was collected from all participants prior to any data collection. In addition participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any point during the research process. After conducting interviews, the data was safeguarded

and kept in a locked filing cabinet in my personal office. This included signed consent forms, completed demographic questionnaires, and printed transcriptions. I kept all the digital information on a password-protected laptop and used pseudonyms for all participants throughout the process. In addition, audio recordings were deleted after transcription and participants were given copies of their personal transcripts to make necessary changes and/or to clarify accuracy (i.e., member checking). I kept in contact with participants throughout the research process and sometimes asked follow up questions via email to clarify participants' responses.

No major ethical issues emerged throughout the research process. I remained committed to upholding the standards of the Research Ethics Board at the University of Windsor and Moxie College at all stages of the research process. It is believed that the risks were minimal and short-term, whereas, the data collected may have positive impacts on pre-service EA training and future praxis.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In this chapter the narratives that were shared by each participant during their interviews are presented with quotes from the participants. Each ES student divulged a unique and meaningful perspective on educational inclusion. As such, each of the four interviewee's stories will be presented in isolation in order to delve deeply into the individual experiences of each participant. These four ES students' attitudes toward educational inclusion should not be generalized or considered to represent the attitudes of ES students across Ontario. This study, however, may have important implications for these four participants or for others in similar circumstances. The stories that these four participants shared delve deeply into their personal lived experiences and have generated further questions about this research field.

To begin the semi-structured interview, all of the participants were asked, "How do you personally define educational inclusion?" Despite all participants having similar educational experiences in the ES program, each participant had a slightly different interpretation of the concept. This perhaps reflects the lack of shared understanding of what constitutes inclusion that was discussed earlier (Glazzard, 2011). Participants discussed their personal and professional experiences both inside and outside of the ES program. In addition, as mature students, all four participants had a great deal of experience in the field of special education. In order to gain insight into final year ES students' attitudes toward educational inclusion, the guiding questions for the semi-structured interviews focused on obtaining information about participants': (1) understanding of educational inclusion, (2) attitude towards educational inclusion, (3) factors that facilitate educational inclusion, and (4) perceived barriers to educational

inclusion. By discussing these four topics throughout the interview process, the participants were attempting to make sense of inclusion. Avramidis and colleagues (2002) described inclusion as "a bewildering concept" (p. 158) because it is neither fully understood nor uniformly implemented. Due to the subjective nature of inclusion as both a philosophy and a practice, it is all the more important that each individual's personal conceptualization and value judgments of inclusion be presented in this chapter as individual stories. All four participants had a slightly different understanding of educational inclusion. Each respondent reflects a unique perspective and the findings for each of the four participants are presented below. General themes that have emerged from the participants' collective experiences will be presented in the subsequent discussion chapter.

April: "Having an EA in every classroom would be amazing!"

Most of April responses started with " I think . . ." and thus fit into the cognitive dimension of attitude. Some of her responses that reflected upon her experiences as a teacher and her experiences from field placement fit into the behavioural dimension of attitude. Finally, very few responses fit into the affective dimension. She does not discuss her own feelings, but does discuss the feelings of students, EAs, and parents in her responses.

Understanding of inclusion. April asserted that educational inclusion was about including all students in the general education classroom. When asked to give her personal definition, she declared, "…educational inclusion to me means that all students are in one classroom together regardless of any disparities in their disability [sic]." April went on to explain that educational inclusion was about everyone, not just students with

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disabilities. She said, "I think inclusion has to be a bigger picture than just with students with exceptionalities. I think inclusion really has to mean everyone." She later built upon this idea by adding, "[Educational inclusion] from what I understood is setting [the classroom] up so that every student has the opportunity to succeed in learning." Although she had previous experience as a teacher in a private school setting, April credited the ES program at Moxie College for her current understanding of educational inclusion. She admitted, "to be honest, before this program I did not know much about it [educational inclusion]."

Attitude towards inclusion. In general, April's attitudes were supportive of educational inclusion. She believed that inclusion in the general education classroom should be considered before alternative service delivery models. To illustrate this point, she said, "I think fundamentally my opinion is that we should always try to have them [students with exceptionalities] in an inclusive classroom first." Despite April's theoretical understanding that inclusion is for everyone, she did not believe that all students could benefit from being included in the general education classroom. She pointed out:

> I think that [decisions on service delivery models] is kind of a case-by-case basis that you would have to look into to see if that [educational setting] would fit for their [the student with an exceptionality] needs. I do see the benefit though, for segregated classrooms, so that they have more one-on-one time without distraction.

April's attitudes toward educational inclusion were in line with provincial policies. The OME stipulates that IPRCs are responsible for placing identified individuals

in the most appropriate educational setting (OME, 2007). Every student who requires

special education services has unique special education needs. As such, each individual

student will require different levels of support to promote their success. April pointed out

that some students benefit more from inclusive environments, whereas others thrive in a

separate environment where they can access more support. April reflected on some of the

students from her field placement experiences to illustrate her point about case-by-case

consideration. She explained:

> I think it [the educational setting] really depends on the child or the student. I
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> have seen some really great . . . [instances of inclusion] on my placement . . . with
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> a student who has ASD in a kindergarten integrated class. I think students like this
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> one would do very well in an inclusive environment. There are certain times . . .
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> for safety [reasons] . . . it may be a better idea to have students with
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> exceptionalities, for at least part of the day, in a different classroom. I think there
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> is room for both, in my opinion.

For April, the social aspect of inclusion was the most important component. She

felt that a student's readiness to socialize with their same-age peers should have a large

impact on service delivery decisions. She explained, "I think the social piece is really one

of the main reasons why an inclusive classroom works." April asserted that in some cases

students with disabilities, particularly with behavioural disorders, would be better off in a

self-contained classroom. Some students, she argued, did not have strong enough social

skills to thrive in an inclusive environment. She elaborated by pointing out that inclusion

might be particularly challenging for students with behavioural disorders. She said, "I

think that in some cases depending on the behavioural issues that may be surrounding

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certain disabilities, it [including students with behavioural disorders] could mean a safety concern for outbursts they may have."

While she recognized the risk to students without exceptionalities, April also pointed out some benefits to inclusion for students without exceptionalities during our discussion. She said, "It is important for . . . [students without exceptionalities] to see that there are other children or students that are different from them. [This will help with] creating empathy [and] support in their communities." I responded by saying, "So you think [inclusion] benefits both parties involved [both students with and without exceptionalities] then?" She clarified and made an important connection from the school environment to the world beyond the classroom. She said, "Yeah, I think so because the world is made up of a whole bunch of different people. They are not all segregated when you get out into the world."

While April attributed her knowledge of inclusion to the ES program, she acknowledged that her attitudes toward educational inclusion were developing before she started the program. She pointed out that her early experiences as a private school teacher resulted in attitudes toward inclusion that may have been overly optimistic. As a teacher in a private school she only had eight students in her class and only a couple of those students were identified with exceptionalities. She recalled:

I think definitely the initial experience I had in a classroom with some of the students that I taught certainly shaped how I felt about inclusion. In independent schools . . . it is a very different scenario than school boards where there are twenty-five kids. There were only eight kids in my class . . . I had the time to be

able to do one-on-one things with the students who were struggling or needing

extra support.

Through her experiences in both private and public schools, April came to recognize the

importance of time and resources. Students with special education needs often require

additional attention and support. With a higher student to staff ratio in a class, it becomes

more challenging to meet the diverse needs of all the students and to include everyone.

Despite these challenges, April remained optimistic and supportive of educational

inclusion.

April also credited her daughters for her optimistic view towards educational

inclusion. Her daughters, three and seven, do not have any identified exceptionalities, but

they were both educated in inclusive classes in a pre-school and grade one class

respectively. She has found that her daughters have had questions about the students with

exceptionalities in their classes. April takes these opportunities to teach her children

about diversity and acceptance. She felt that her daughters were better prepared to

succeed in inclusive settings because they have had the opportunity to reflect on their

experiences and ask questions. In addition, April acknowledged that her background in

special education has played an important role in these discussions and has allowed her to

explain the importance of inclusion and classroom diversity to her daughters.

Facilitating Factors. Through her experiences, April was able to identify two

factors that she believed are necessary for educational inclusion to be successful. The

factors she identified were (1) educational support and (2) creating an inviting

environment.

Educational support. Not surprisingly, April believed that EAs play an integral

role in the special education team and in assisting all students who require additional educational support. She explained:

> From . . . placement [and] my personal experience [one of the most important factors is] having . . . [enough staff] to be able to have the support in place if there are students that need extra support so they can interact with their peers in the classroom. I think having an EA in every class . . . would be a utopian ideal.

Through her experiences in private and public settings, April expressed a need to increase staff to provide more support for students (with and without disabilities). This emphasis on increasing the number of EAs may reflect back to her experiences in the private school setting where the student to staff ratio was much more manageable. She later reiterated this point when she proclaimed, "Having an EA in every classroom would be amazing!" Reflecting on her placement experiences, April realized just how important EAs are, especially for students who are high needs/low functioning. She reflected on her experiences with a student from her placement in an inclusive classroom:

> One of the students that I work with for instance . . . is considered low functioning [and] non-verbal. He has outbursts if he is having challenges or is finding his stress level gets higher. He will just flop down or try to run out of the room. So if I wasn't there or the EA wasn't there, there would be a big problem. I cannot imagine him being in an inclusive environment without the support he is getting. So I definitely think having an EA [in the classroom is a facilitating factor for inclusion].

April emphasized the importance of the EA's role by recognizing that EAs provide much needed support to students who have special education needs. EAs often work one-on-

one with students who require special education services in order to make education more accessible and enhance educational inclusion initiatives.

While April emphasized EAs, she also advocated for educational support in general. This includes the entire special education team (e.g., teachers, principals, etc.). Every member in the special education team has an important role to play. April pointed out the importance of a team approach for providing educational support. She believed that this is particularly important for implementing programming more quickly without wasting any critical time. She explained the need for " . . . lots of layers of people who help to support the students [to cut down on] . . . the amount of time it takes for a plan to be put into place with the necessary tools that the students need." If students cannot get the special education services they are entitled to in a timely fashion it can compromise educational inclusion efforts. She recalled a prime example from her field placement experience:

> This one student who is low functioning . . . the main thing that keeps him focused and actually helps to calm his anxiety is Play-Doh. It took them three weeks to get Play-Doh from the time the teacher asked the school board. Getting the supports to the child sooner will enable them to . . . participate more in an inclusive environment. So I think the time frame for planning purposes . . . [needs to be] shorter.

April also emphasized the importance of having an EA who has been prepared properly for their role in the special education team. She pointed out that many of the supervising EAs on placement have not gone through a pre-service EA program. April appreciated the wealth of knowledge the EAs had from their experiences, but she asserted

that an EA should be "A real impactful person . . . rather than [just] a warm body." This approach lends support to further expand on pre-service and in-service training opportunities for EAs. As EAs take on their new role in special education, it is absolutely essential they have the proper knowledge and skills to work with the most challenging and vulnerable student population (i.e., students with exceptionalities) (Giangreco et al., 2010). She concluded, "I think it should be mandatory that you should have this background [the ES program]."

Consistent with her definition of inclusion, which emphasized including everyone, April believed that EAs should provide educational support for all students in need (i.e., with and without exceptionalities). She expanded upon this idea of inclusive support, by reflecting on her role as an EA candidate on placement. She said, "I am there [on placement] to support the two specific children or students, but I am still engaging with the other kids. It makes them [the students with exceptionalities] feel less ostracized from the rest of the group." She believed that all students could benefit from additional support and by assisting all students, EAs would not contribute to the socially exclusion of students with exceptionalities (Katz et al., 2012).

Creating an inviting environment. In addition to more educational support for students with and without identified exceptionalities, April declared that it was essential to create an inviting environment for all students. That is, an environment where all students feel welcome to be contributing members to the classroom and the school. These suggestions reflected April's overall understanding of inclusion, which was that educational inclusion was about including all students rather than focusing on just students with disabilities. Despite this theoretical understanding of inclusion, April still

expressed apprehensions regarding the application of this idea, particularly with students who have severe disabilities. In theory though, educational inclusion to her, meant creating an environment where differences are celebrated and where every student has an opportunity to actively participate in their own learning. In addition, she felt the classrooms should be set up in such a way that it promotes inclusion for all learners. In this model, the focus shifts to the inclusion of the entire student population rather than specifically on students with disabilities. For April this starts by educating students and engaging in their curiosities about diversity. April viewed student differences as a teachable moment for all students. She explained that having open discussions with all of the students would create a more inclusive environment. These discussions, she argued, should focus on all types of differences (e.g., ability, race, sex, etc.) in a safe, controlled environment with knowledgeable facilitators. She felt this would allow students to safely explore their feelings and curiosities about student differences. Similar to how she teaches her daughters about diversity and acceptance, April believed that all students could benefit from having discussions about the different students with and without exceptionalities. She reinforced this idea when I asked her "What do you think is needed for inclusion to be successful?" She responded by saying:

> Other than having [more support staff], I think that having the discussion with the rest of the students about understanding differences of all students, not just specifically the ones that have been diagnosed or [identified] with any kind of exceptionality. Creating an environment where, I guess differences are celebrated in a way. I think having a classroom that is open [and] having an inviting kind of room where all students can participate.

Barriers. Through the interview conversation I had with April, she identified two major barriers to inclusion—(1) poor attitudes and (2) power dynamics. When asked about barriers to educational inclusion April paused for a long time before identifying these barriers.

Poor attitudes. April believed the biggest barrier facing inclusive education was poor attitudes toward disability and inclusion. In particular, April was concerned with parents' attitudes. She recognized that her education and experiences have given her a positive outlook with regards to her own children being educated alongside students with exceptionalities. When she talked about how she informs her two daughters, however, she acknowledged that most parents she has come in contact with have apprehensions about inclusion. She said, "I think that unfortunately I am not the norm. I have heard some other parents speak . . . [about students] that have exceptionalities [and assert that they] should not be in the classroom." Parents' attitudes toward disability and inclusion could have a great impact on their children's attitudes. This is particularly important because April and the other participants in this study emphasized the importance of the social component of inclusion. If students develop negative attitudes toward inclusion it could comprise social opportunities for students with exceptionalities. April's comments about parents' attitudes intrigued me, so I inquired further by asking, "What are their [the parents'] big concerns?" April replied by saying:

> I think they are worried that the teacher is going to focus too much on the student that needs the extra help and not on their own children. I think that they are afraid in some cases for their children's safety with behaviours that may arise because of certain exceptionalities.

April pointed out that sometimes parents' attitudes are shaped by the nature of the student's disability. She explained that parents are more likely to show compassion for students with physical disabilities, as compared to cognitive or behavioural disorders. She explained, "they would rather see a child in wheelchair . . . than deal with a child that has autism or any type of behavioural challenges. A wheelchair is something they can kind of wrap their head around." When considering the long history of education, inclusion is a relatively new practice/philosophy that many parents may not have fully experienced in school growing up. April stressed that EAs play an important role putting parents' minds at ease. She said from her experiences, "[Parents] almost have a sigh of relief knowing there is an EA in the room that is supporting that specific child or specific children."

April noticed that some teachers' attitudes can also negatively impact inclusion efforts. She observed that some teachers are concerned with the impact a student with a disability may have on the overall classroom culture. She said, "Teachers have a certain idea in mind of how they want the classroom to run and I think when there are students with exceptionalities . . . [they can] cause some kind of . . . [disruption] in that vision." Bennett (2009) pointed out that the classroom teacher is responsible for all of the students in their class, with and without exceptionalities. In addition, the classroom teacher should be directing EAs assigned to the students in their class. For some teachers, including students with exceptionalities in their classes may be viewed as a burden. April suggested that teachers needed to be more flexible to the unpredictable nature of special education. April emphasized the importance of experience in and knowledge of special education. In addition, she felt teachers and EAs need to work together to share the responsibilities of educational inclusion.

Power Dynamics. April observed some strong power dynamic issues in the school where she was placed for field placement. She found as an ES student it was difficult to suggest new ideas to her supervising EA. April expressed concerns about offending the EA by suggesting new strategies for the student they were supporting. April had learned a great deal in the ES program and was excited to apply these skills, but her supervising EA did not have this background. She explained, "I want to offer strategies to the EA I am [assigned to], but I also do not want to show her up by saying, 'you obviously don't know what you are doing [April laughed].'" April was quick to point out, however, that the working professionals were also experiencing power dynamics issues. She observed that her supervising EA was experiencing a similar problem with the classroom teacher. She said, "I also see her [the EA] feeling that she may be stepping on the teacher's toes if she goes ahead and starts planning for this child or student." The EA role is becoming more instructional, which has resulted in some overlap between EAs' and teachers' duties. This overlap is not always met with collaboration, but rather with power dynamic issues. Poor communication regarding the division of labour between teachers and EAs can have a negative impact on the overall quality of special education delivery and can hinder the effectiveness of inclusive practices (Angelides et al., 2009). April felt that EAs should be collaborated with because they often have the most intimate knowledge of the students with special education needs. To illustrate this point, April recalled an experience with a behavioural specialist at the school. She said, "I can see . . . what will help the child because I am working one-on-one with them, but the people who set up the plans for this child only see them in planned visits that are in separate rooms from the classroom." April felt that the EAs should be consulted because the data the behavioural

specialist was collecting was contrived and did not reflect the day-to-day dealings with the student. This dynamic is especially important in this case because the data collected can have important implications on the special education strategies and services utilized.

Anne: "Inclusion means that you treat everyone with respect and kindness."

Anne's responses fit into all three of the dimensions of attitude. She emphasized the cognitive and affective dimensions of attitude by discussing her thoughts and feelings about inclusion through her stories. To a lesser extent, Anne's responses fell into the behavioural dimension when she discussed her experiences on placement and her future role as an EA.

Understanding of inclusion. For Anne, educational inclusion was about students with exceptionalities being included socially with their peers. She placed far less emphasis on academics. She asserted, however, that social inclusion could have a direct impact on students' academic successes. Anne explained that if students were excluded socially, they might grow to dislike school and may disengage from academics. Many of the students who receive special education services already struggle with academics, and social exclusion would only compound these learning difficulties. To illustrate this point Anne discussed her friend's child (who has an exceptionality). She shared, "Educational inclusion, to me its more about including the child socially. My girlfriend whose child has special needs, I have seen him fail horribly academically and I think it is a direct result of him not being included socially." This understanding of inclusion places a great deal of power in the hands of the students, who have shown apprehensions about befriending students with exceptionalities (Avramidis, 2013; de Boer et al., 2013; Pijl et

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al., 2008).

Anne shared that prior to the ES program she had heard about educational inclusion from her experience as a bus driver for students with special needs. When I asked what impact the ES program has had on her attitudes toward educational inclusion, she asserted that the program had reinforced her existing ideas about educational inclusion rather than developed them. Anne said, "I think that they [the ES instructors] have given me . . . the real academic reasons behind [inclusion]. It is great to have the gut feeling, but then to read and learn about it [reinforced my beliefs]." In addition, Anne did not feel that inclusion had to take place in the general education classroom. She pointed out that students could be excluded in the general education classroom if inclusion strategies were improperly implemented. She recalled an experience from her field placement:

> I noticed that the student [with an exceptionality] was turned to face the EA and the EA was very much working one-on-one with the student [at the back of the class]. It was very difficult because I was thinking, 'wouldn't it be better to place the wheelchair in a different position or differently so she was actual more a part of the actual class?'

Anne recognized that inclusion is more than a placement in the general education classroom. She pointed out that it is the overall experience for the students with special education needs that determines if a student is being included or not. She saw inclusion as more of a guiding philosophy or general principles that schools should promote in order to make students feel included and welcome. For Anne, this did not necessarily mean that students needed to be in the general education classroom as a prerequisite for inclusion.

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She explained, "I think we can still achieve inclusion even if students go to a self-contained class because inclusion does not need to be just in the classroom. You can still include a self-contained class in the spirit of the entire school!" Anne explained that her overall understanding of inclusion is based on a set of core principles. She summed up her definition of inclusion by stating, "Inclusion means that you treat everyone with respect and kindness." She attributed this understanding of inclusion to her two placements where she recalled welcoming school cultures. Anne reflected on her field placement experience at a high school:

 In the high school I was at, all the students had an IEP so [long pause] it's almost like a self-contained school because just about everybody had some kind of accommodation. But, it really felt like the teachers were invested in the students' success [and the] . . . well being of the students generally. So it really made me feel like it was a place where anyone could go and anyone would be welcome. By teachers I mean the EAs as well.

From her experiences at this high school, Anne grew to appreciate their inclusive school culture. This experience helped to shape her understanding of inclusion and ideals regarding its implementation. Interestingly, the students that attend the school are excluded from students without exceptionalities, but Anne shared that her field placement at this school embodied educational inclusion and played an important role in how she developed her understanding of this concept.

Attitude towards inclusion. Anne acknowledged that her attitudes toward educational inclusion have changed overtime. When she was a child, disability was part of her normal day because her father had a physical disability. In addition, she recalled

her experiences as a bus driver for students with special needs having a great impact on her attitudes toward inclusion. From her experiences on the bus, Anne came to the realization that students with exceptionalities were not so different compared to students without exceptionalities. She recalled a pivotal experience she had with her son that helped to shape her attitude. She reminisced:

I started driving a school bus for special needs kids when I was 22 or 23, so I was very young. I had a little baby and so this was just part of our daily life. We would go pick up these kids [students with exceptionalities] and bring them to school, no big deal. When my son started to go to kindergarten—he was getting ready to go to JK—he was super excited. He liked getting his backpack ready and that kind of stuff. One day he came up to me and he asked, 'when do I go pick up my wheelchair?' I looked at him and I said, 'what do you mean, you don't need a wheelchair.' He said, 'all the kids who go to school have a wheelchair, when do I get my wheelchair?' So that really made me realize that there was no difference between him and the kids [with exceptionalities] that he had gotten to know from when he was a baby to when he was ready to go to school. Those were the kids that he knew—those were school kids. For me, that moment was the real moment when I realized that there really is no difference. There was never the separation that kids should be in this class and other children should be in that class.

As a result of this experience, Anne's early attitudes toward educational inclusion were that students with exceptionalities should not be subjected to any kind of different treatment in education. At that time she believed that all students (with or without exceptionalities) should be together with their same-age peers (i.e., full-inclusion). Anne

explained that her attitudes toward educational inclusion have since changed as a result of the ES program. She has worked in both inclusive and segregated environments during her field placement experiences. These experiences in classroom settings have helped Anne to see the importance of evaluating each student's service delivery model on a case-by-case basis. Overall though, she supported including students with exceptionalities in the general education class. She shared how her attitude had shifted as a result of ES program:

> I [now] recognize that there are some needs that are probably addressed better in a contained class, where I may not have felt that before being in a classroom [on field placement]. So I can see that there are benefits to contained classes now, but I still think that if inclusion is an option, it is probably the better option.

Being placed in a classroom setting helped Anne to see the challenges of full-inclusion and that every student has unique needs. In addition, the coursework in the ES program helped to educate Anne on the complexities of special education and educational inclusion. She recognized that her initial attitudes toward inclusion might have been overly optimistic and conceded that her experiences in the ES program helped to ground her attitudes with more realistic expectations.

Facilitating Factor. Anne identified knowledge as the main facilitating factor for her conceptualization of educational inclusion. She asserted that the more knowledge people have about disability and special education, the more successful inclusion could be. Much like April, she believed having meaningful conversations with students and allowing them to ask questions would help inclusion to be more successful. She argued that this would help students to be more comfortable with students who may be perceived

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as different. She felt that children are much more accepting of individual differences compared to adults, but need an appropriate forum to properly learn about disability and special education. This perspective led her to think back to her son's early experiences on her bus:

> Children do not see differences, they really don't. My son saw the cool wheelchair; he never realized that Joey couldn't walk. What he saw was that Joey got to go around in a wheelchair and that was pretty cool! I think that it is all about perception, so I think if we have a conversation and talk about things then maybe we can help.

Anne generalized her son's experience to assert that all children have the potential to see past differences and accept students with exceptionalities into their social circles. She emphasized the importance of educating students about disability and acceptance early on. Anne's suggestion to educate students early on fits nicely with her emphasis on social inclusion. Anne's suggestion recognized that students have a great deal of power in the social dynamics of school.

Anne also stressed the importance of educating staff in the school about disability and special education. As an emerging EA she acknowledged the importance of the ES program. When I asked about what she has learned in the ES program she shared, "you learn how to better include. Learning those skills and strategies and being able to appeal to all different types of learners and making sure that places are accessible." She also recognized the importance of continuing to learn and develop as a professional. She said, "[EAs need] to go out and get the knowledge and then share that knowledge!" She pointed out that in the information age we live in, educators are fortunate to have a

plethora of strategies at their disposal (e.g., token economies, social stories, "first-then" strategies, etc.). Anne viewed EAs as a great resource in special education for all staff and students. She believed that EAs needed to be role models to students and educate staff in the school on their area of expertise (i.e., special education). She explained:

I think that the staff are [sic] the ones who set the example for the students, so I think it should start with the educators. I think kids do whatever you show them to do. I mean kids are sponges, right? I think it [being a role model] is important because we [trained EAs] have had so much instruction on inclusion. I think it is very important for us to bridge the gaps that might be in other educators. I think we [EAs] need to be advocates, right?

Anne shared that her friend's son was stigmatized in the early years of his education because his kindergarten teacher socially ostracized him in front of his peers. The teacher constantly pointed him out as an example of what not to do in front of his classmates. Students pay close attention to educators' social cues, which can result in students being labeled. This was the case for Anne's friend's son, who struggled socially for many years to come. Anne pointed out that educational inclusion starts with the teachers and the EAs having an inclusive disposition and by trying to actively include all students. ES graduates will be better prepared to model inclusion because they will have learned the specific knowledge and skills in special education. This may be particularly important in elementary school because students are beginning to develop their early conceptualization of disability and educational inclusion.

Barriers. Anne discussed two main barriers to inclusion: (1) ignorance and (2) grouping.

Ignorance. Anne recognized that when educators do not necessarily have knowledge about disability and special education it could pose a barrier to educational inclusion. Anne recalled a story about a teacher who did not have the proper understanding of disability or special education and this ignorance resulted in her friend's son being treated inequitably.

> My girlfriend tells me a story of when he [her friend's son] was little and he was in Kindergarten. The Kindergarten teacher would regularly . . . make an example of him and these kids have always gone to the same school together from the beginning. So he basically got stigmatized when he was little and that has followed him throughout his school career.

Anne's story about her friend's son points out the importance of knowledge and preparation for special education. This story showcases how ignorance or lack of knowledge can have a negative impact on special education delivery. Anne suggested that ignorance regarding disability could also lead to exclusion in the community. Anne shared another story from her childhood to showcase how lack of knowledge or ignorance can lead to poor treatment of people with disabilities in general. She recalled a trip she took as a child with her father:

> There was this woman this one time when my dad was on a plane. My dad couldn't physically bend his leg and she was giving him a really hard time. She was saying that his leg was in the aisle way and he couldn't be sitting like that and that he had to bring his knee in. He said, 'my hip is fused straight and I cannot physically [move], I have to sit like this.' I don't think she was trying to be

malicious, I think she honestly didn't know and I think that that is one of the

biggest problems.

Anne discussed ignorance as a barrier to educational inclusion through her own stories, as

well as the stories she has heard from those who are close to her (i.e., her friend). She

pointed out that people with disabilities often require different treatment in order to break

down barriers to inclusion, both in schools and in the community at large. Through these

stories, Anne made a strong point about equity and pointed out that equal treatment for

people with disabilities is not necessarily equitable.

    Grouping. Anne asserted that inclusion is challenging to implement in the current

education system. She felt that we have to revaluate the effectiveness of grouping

students and teaching them a standardized curriculum. Anne elaborated:

> I have a problem with taking chunks of people and grouping them without
>
> looking at them as individuals to say, 'What do you want learn?' [and] 'What are
>
> you ready to learn?' Sort of like how Kindergarten is student-directed, I think that
>
> there is a great place for that in all of education as long as it is regulated and it's
>
> guided. You know, it should be guided, but it should be individual.'

She thought that inclusion could be more successful if each individual student, both with

and without exceptionalities, had his or her own personalized education program. She

acknowledged that students with exceptionalities in Ontario have IEPs, but she thought

that if everyone were on their own educational journey, students with exceptionalities

might be better included because their experience would not be drastically different from

that of the rest of the class.

Kelly: "We have to continue asking, is this the best thing for this student?"

Kelly mostly emphasized the behavioural and cognitive dimensions of attitude in her responses. She often explained her thoughts and beliefs by giving examples of situations she has been involved in, has observed, or in terms of planned behaviour for her future role as an EA. Her responses did have elements of the affective dimension, but to a much lesser extent. She asserted her feelings when discussing her frustrations with some of the current problems in the special education system and when talking about her personal experiences as a parent of a child who has a learning disability.

Understanding of inclusion. Kelly had a variety of experiences in special education to draw from. Growing up both of her brothers had learning disabilities and now her son has a learning disability as well. Through these experiences Kelly has come to understand inclusion as the educational setting that best fits the particular student's needs. She said concisely, "Inclusion to me . . . is involving the student [with an exceptionality] in the setting that's best for their success. It's about everyone having an opportunity." Kelly conceptualized educational inclusion as the environment and/or set of conditions, which best sets up the student with an exceptionality for success. This understanding acknowledged the uniqueness of each student and thus the importance of a case-by-case approach based on each student's individual needs. Kelly attributed her understanding of inclusion to her son, who has a learning disability. She recalled that the setting that was best for his success changed over time. She explained:

> With my son it kind of really defined it for me when he was [slight pause while
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> pondering the correct age] seventeen. When he was little he hated being pulled
>
> out [of class] because then he felt different . . . but in high school with the GLE

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[General Learning Environment] program [a self-contained class], where they pull

out kids that have some kind of learning disability and provide more support. That

classroom is his favourite classroom because there he feels normal.

Kelly's understanding of educational inclusion came from a very personal place (i.e., her

experiences with her brothers and son). She pointed out that successfully including

students with exceptionalities in a general education class is not always possible because

it doesn't work for all students. Through her recollection of her son's experience, she

pointed out the importance of having an educational approach that is developmentally

appropriate. Not only did she suggest that the special education approach should vary

from one student to the next, but also from one year to another. She feared that students'

special education services were not always re-evaluated and reported seeing IEPs that

were simply cut and pasted from the previous year. Kelly's story of her son's experiences

in elementary and high school illustrated how an individual student's readiness to be

included in the regular classroom can play an important role in the success or failure of

educational inclusion.

Kelly had a wealth of practical experiences with her son, but the ES program

provided her with a theoretical understanding of educational inclusion. For Kelly, the

theoretical and practical were very different and difficult to reconcile at times. As a

result, her personal understanding of inclusion was a combination of theory and practice

(with an emphasis on the practical components). She discussed the process of taking the

theoretical and making it practical. She said, " Somehow you kind of merge these [theory

and practice] into a tapestry of what is going to work for the kid or for the student." She

acknowledged the importance of knowing the theories, but reiterated that every student is

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unique and requires an individual approach.

Kelly acknowledged that making pedagogical decisions without a theoretical understanding of best practices from research could result in the adoption of ineffective approaches. Burns and Ysseldyke (2009) point out that the research to practice gap, a prevalent problem in education, also exists in special education. Their study points out the dangers of using ineffective strategies in special education (e.g., modality training) as opposed to evidence-based practice (e.g., direct instruction). Failure to use best practices can result in less effective special education services being provided, which can a pose a challenge to inclusive ideals. Kelly discussed the research to practice gap in special education by saying:

> The theories we learned in class and the realities in the real world are completely different. We can talk about it all we want in theory . . . and in an ideal world this is what we are going to do . . . but the reality is when you hit the classroom and when things start changing . . . every student is different. What is good for one student may not be good for another student. I am shocked at how big the chasm is between the two [theory and practice].

There were aspects of both the practical and theoretical components in Kelly's overall understanding of educational inclusion. Her understanding of educational inclusion was most greatly influenced by her practical experiences with her son and through her field placements. Through these personal experiences with her brothers and son, she observed the pragmatic challenges presented by educational inclusion. As such, Kelly expressed her appreciation for theoretical ideals, but built flexibility into her understanding of educational inclusion because of the capricious nature of special education.

Attitude towards inclusion. Overall, Kelly did not support including students with exceptionalities in the general education class. She felt strongly that educational inclusion does not necessarily benefit students with or without disabilities. She expressed concerns that students with exceptionalities can cause disruptions for the rest of the class. She said, "If you put a child who is very low functioning in a regular classroom, how much is that going to draw away or disturb the classroom for the other twenty-eight students?" She also felt that this approach fails to consider what is best for each individual student and was concerned about the practicality of educating students with special needs alongside typically developing peers. When asked what her attitude towards educational inclusion was, Kelly replied, " I struggle with [inclusion] because sometimes . . . I wonder if it is the best thing for the student [with an exceptionality]. I think that these kids are overwhelmed in [regular] classrooms. I mean we are setting them up to fail!'" Kelly's overall attitude appeared to be shaped by her concern for the success or failure of students with exceptionalities, which may be a reflection of her experiences with her son. She asserted that students with exceptionalities have a better chance of academic success in a separate learning environment. She expressed concerns that a general education class does not account for students' individual needs. For example, the environment in a regular class is set up for general education and not specifically for students with exceptionalities. Students with exceptionalities require a specialized approach to meet their unique needs. To illustrate this point Kelly recalled an experience from her most recent field placement in an inclusive automotive class:

> I work with high school students who are trying to learn life skills so they are in
> an automotive class. We bring five children with autism into an automotive class.

You know when a fan belt squeaks [and] you hear that really horrible sound. Well we have 5 students who are sensitive to sound and they went in all directions where there are cars and equipment. So, okay is this the best place for these students? Are they really learning automotive skills? Is this classroom the best space for them? Two of them are just on edge as soon as they get in there. What are they are going to gain from that? I don't know if it is justified.

Kelly questioned the effectiveness of educational inclusion. She felt that students with exceptionalities would have a better opportunity to learn in a more structured and supportive learning environment. She expressed concerns that the general education class might be inappropriate, particularly for students with severe disabilities. She said, "Children who are medically fragile [and] very low functioning . . . their version of education is completely different than the general classroom." Students with severe disabilities helped to illustrate the importance of her stance, but overall Kelly did not openly support educational inclusion regardless of the level of functioning of the student. This differed from some of the other participants who argued inclusion was ideal when possible. Kelly concluded that inclusive practices could sometimes exclude students with exceptionalities. She explained:

Sometimes I think [inclusion] points out their disability more than it includes them. It makes them [students with exceptionalities] realize their differences and for some students it points out their struggles and their challenges. You bring a kid into a class with an EA and he is included, but he is still different because he is the only child with an adult next to them working one-on-one.

Kelly discussed the social challenges of inclusion, a point that was emphasized by both April and Anne. What makes Kelly's perspective different was she felt that including students in the general education class could exclude students with exceptionalities. In fact, she expressed concerns that the presence of an EA could socially exclude these students. This concern may be valid because recent research has shown that students felt less motivated to socialize with their classmates who were working closely with an EA (Katz et al., 2012). This is an important consideration that requires further investigation when discussing the effectiveness of EAs in inclusive classrooms.

Facilitating factors. Through our discussion, Kelly pointed out factors that could help to enhance educational inclusion efforts. She discussed two factors that she believed would enhance the likelihood of students with exceptionalities experiencing success in a general education class. The two major facilitating factors that she identified were: (1) having more of a team approach and (2) educators having up-to-date knowledge and skills.

Team approach. During the interview with Kelly, she discussed several team members including: teachers, EAs, special education resource teachers (SERTs), principals, parents, and students with exceptionalities. She had two very different field placement experiences. At one of her placements she observed a collaborative special education team and at the other she did not see this team approach. She felt that the collaborative team was much more effective in including students with exceptionalities. She said, "We learn from other EAs . . . [through an] exchange of information . . . as a community of learners. In my first placement at the elementary school it was a community of learners. The SERTs and the EAs were sharing information."

In particular, Kelly felt that EAs had an important role to play in the special education team. It was not surprising that this was a common assertion made by the ES students interviewed. Kelly expressed concerns about EAs' position within the special education team. Even though EAs often work most closely with students who have exceptionalities, they often are perceived as the least important member of the team. Kelly pointed out that many veteran EAs have come to accept their place at the bottom of the educational staff hierarchy and she asserted this might hinder their effectiveness in the school.

There are clear power dynamic issues among some teachers and EAs. Foucault discussed the importance of the relationship between knowledge and power. He said, "I see nothing wrong in the practice of a person who, knowing more than others in a specific game of truth, tells those others what to do, teaches them, and transmits knowledge and techniques to them" (as cited in Downing, 2008, p. 102). Teachers have traditionally had more knowledge and expertise than EAs in education because the EA role was not originally an instructional position. Groom (2006) pointed out that "The [EA] role itself has . . . undergone a rapid transformation from that of the classroom 'helper'—assisting the teacher in general classroom organization—to one that is more specifically directed to support the teaching and learning process" (p. 199). I would argue that with the emergence of pre-service programs such as the ES program, EAs now have what French and Raven (1959) called an expert power base in special education. Teachers do, however, have a legitimate power base because they are appointed to direct EAs in their classrooms (OME, 2004). Kelly expressed frustration with those EAs who have accepted their position as "just the EAs". She exclaimed, "I am being taught that

we're an EA and we are this child's advocate! So let's fight for [special education and educational inclusion] getting better."

Kelly predicted that in good time EAs would become more valued members of the special education team if they continue to use effective strategies and showcase their successes with the most challenging and vulnerable student population (i.e., students with exceptionalities). One of the most important working relationships in the special education team is between teachers and EAs. Teachers and EAs in an inclusive classroom should work closely together. Kelly felt that teachers needed to embrace EAs in their classroom as experts and work with them as equals. She explained:

> [I think it is beneficial when] teachers are really in tune with understanding that the EA has the experience, has learned a little more about it [special education], [and] knows the student [with an exceptionality] better. Generally we work with the student all day long. The teacher has 28 students [so] . . . I think it should be a partnership . . . [where teachers and] EAs use more of a team-based approach.

Kelly recognized the importance of the collaboration between teachers and EAs, but acknowledged that this dynamic still needed some refining. She noticed that teachers and EAs did not always work well together.

In addition to educators working together in the special education team, Kelly also emphasized the importance of working together with parents. Kelly talked about her son who has a learning disability and pointed out that she understands the perspective of parents and the challenges associated with having a child who has a disability. Kelly saw parents as experts on their children and as a great resource to the special education team when utilized properly. She explained:

I have seen the struggles my son went through. When I go into the classroom

coming from the perspective I have, I know what the parents feel like. So when

you hear a teacher complaining about a parent who has children with special

needs . . . you have to stand back and realize that that parent has to deal with that

child 24/7.

Many parents/guardians may not have the formal training in special education or

disability studies, but they live it everyday. Having had this experience as a parent of a

child with an LD, Kelly knew just how important the parents' perspectives are.

Lastly, she also emphasized that educators can learn a great deal from the students

with exceptionalities as well. She said, "We learn from the students first and foremost

[by] . . . listening to the students. They are our best teachers and I think it is very easy to

do." Kelly and I discussed the importance of including students with exceptionalities

themselves in the decision making process and the importance of teaching students how

to self-advocate. Kelly concluded, in order to enhance the likelihood of successful

educational inclusion, all members of the special education team need to be working

together toward common goals. The more stakeholders who collaborate and positively

contribute to the special education team the better.

Up-to-date knowledge and skills. Kelly also emphasized the importance of

educators having up-to-date knowledge and skills for 21st century special education.

Kelly felt that proper preparation in special education was essential in order to offer

students evidence-based strategies that could help to foster their success and

independence in an inclusive context. When asked about her experiences in the ES

program and how this has prepared her for modern special education in Ontario, she

shared, "[The ES program] gives me a bigger toolbox to play with. It kind of gives me a

better perspective." Kelly appreciated the education she has received in the ES program

at Moxie College, but recognized that educators have to continue learning in order to

keep their knowledge and skills up-to-date. She felt this was especially important because

special education is constantly evolving. Special education in Ontario has changed

extensively over the past 35 years. It is paramount that educators who have a direct

impact on special education service delivery understand and can apply the most relevant

and effective practices.

Kelly acknowledged that this field requires a commitment to lifelong learning and

ongoing professional development. She explained, "I think [I] . . . still have to keep

learning [and] continuously educating myself and staying connected. Once I am totally

out of school I have to make sure that I keep the new information coming." There are

various ways that educators can stay current in the field of special education. For

example, educators can take advantage of in-service training, professional workshops,

professional organizations, online forums, etc. An ES program is a great starting point for

aspiring EAs. The program offers students a foundation of knowledge and skills in

special education through a combination of intensive coursework and field placements.

Barriers. Kelly identified two major barriers to educational inclusion: (1)

educators are inadequately prepared for special education and (2) the education system

attempts to normalize students with disabilities.

Inadequately prepared for special education. Kelly pointed out that some

teachers, EAs, and even principals working in special education have not been adequately

trained to implement the most effective evidence-based practices in special education.

She found that teachers' understandings of special education concepts varied greatly from one classroom to the next. In terms of dispositions, she observed that some teachers were very understanding of students with exceptionalities and others were very rigid in their practices. Kelly thought that these differences were a result of a lack of knowledge and experience with special education. She explained:

> I think teachers need to learn more about special education. I have been in so many different classrooms, even in just these six months [in the ES program] and I am surprised by the different levels of understanding of special ed. for teachers from classroom to classroom . . . but I think that will change with more training with the teacher's program going to two years now. I am hoping they would put more than one special education class into that.

Kelly felt strongly that pre-service programs and on the job experiences play an important role in preparing EAs and teachers for the challenges associated with educational inclusion. She implied that the more experience one has with special education, through training and work experience, the more prepared they would be to implement effective strategies that promote educational inclusion. In addition, much like the participants in this study, everyone has a slightly different understanding of educational inclusion. Kelly has observed that these different understandings of inclusion among educators have led to differences in how special education is delivered in each classroom. She elaborated, "I have seen . . . an amazingly inclusive classroom, but in the same school I have seen a classroom that was so uninviting it was scary, but that was uninviting for all students, [not just students with exceptionalities]." Classroom teachers play an extremely important role setting up an inclusive learning environment. As Kelly

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points out, setting up a classroom that is welcoming to all learners is an important step toward educational inclusion.

Kelly was also concerned that some EAs may not be connecting theory to practice. In particular, she was concerned about EAs who have not completed a pre-service program. She explained:

Some of the [EAs] . . . working with kids have been hired without any training. I kind of made the assumption that every EA had all this [pre-service] training [laughs] and it is not always the case. You can have an EA who has been doing this for fifteen years and has such a great understanding of the kids, but has no theory to back what they know.

All EAs have experience working in special education settings, but not all EAs have the academic qualifications to guide and support their approaches in the classroom. Kelly and other participants in this study, who are immersed in the ES program, noticed that EAs without these credentials were often unaware of the different evidence-based strategies that exist. Kelly pointed out that EAs needed to be educated on the variety of strategies that exist in special education, as well as critically appraise their work to measure the effectiveness of their approaches.

Kelly even expressed concerns that some principals with whom she had interacted with did not have a great deal of experience in or knowledge of special education. She recalled an interaction she had with a principal, "I was talking to a principal . . . about a student [who was] stimming and she was like, 'I have no idea what you are talking about.' So it kind of shocked me!" Stimming is a self-stimulating behaviour (e.g., hand flapping) that is common among students with ASD. Kelly implied that if the principal

does not have knowledge about special education, they would be less equipped to meet the needs of diverse learners in their school.

Kelly pointed out that some teachers and EAs are inadequately prepared to work with one another in the special education milieu. She observed during her field placement experience that the two professionals did not know how to effectively work together. She explained, "A lot of teachers don't know what to do with the EA. I have seen a lot of friction between teachers and the EAs." EAs are supposed to be taking direction from teachers, but not all classroom teachers have a background in special education to effectively direct EAs. Kelly expressed hopes that the new two-year bachelor of education program in Ontario would more adequately prepare teachers for special education. The friction Kelly observed may be present because the teacher and EAs do not have a strong understanding of what an EA's role entails. She said, "I was shocked that the EA role does not have description within the [Ontario] Ministry of Education documentation. [The EA is staff working] one-on-one with these students." An EA's role is often complex and ever-changing depending on the needs of the student(s) to whom they are assigned.

Normalization. Kelly felt that the education system is striving to assimilate students with disabilities, rather than embracing them as different. She thought that it was important to acknowledge everyone's differences because every classroom has diverse learners. She emphasized the importance of recognizing that both students with and without disabilities are different. She explained:

We are all different! Right? I am different than you . . . but it is that idea that we kind of have to say we are all normal. We should say, 'this is who I am, these are

my strengths, these are my weaknesses, love me!' Right? Everyone who walks

into a class brings their strengths and weaknesses and I think when we try to

blend them . . . sometimes that is the problem.'

She asserted that the current system of special education attempts to remedy or fix

students with exceptionalities in an attempt to bring them closer to a prescribed normal.

As an alternative, Kelly recommended taking a strength-based approach with all students.

That is, emphasize students' individual strengths in order to enhance the overall

collective classroom experience. This approach presupposes that all students have

strengths that can be utilized to create a more inclusive and diverse learning environment.

This approach, she argued, would help to include all students because all students have

something meaningful to contribute to the learning environment. By acknowledging their

differences, she argued, all students could learn from one another. In our discussions,

Kelly acknowledged the benefits of classroom diversity. She emphasized that every

student is different and brings a unique perspective into the classroom. Overall, Kelly had

several valuable suggestions to enhance the quality of educational inclusion efforts.

Grace: "[The ES] program is phenomenal . . . it prepares us to be EAs."

Grace's responses feel into all three dimensions of attitude. The cognitive

dimension was most strongly represented because she often asserted her thoughts/beliefs

about inclusion as an educational philosophy. She discussed behavioural components of

attitude when recalling field placement experiences and while discussing some strategies

that she plans to implement as a working EA. Finally, the affective component was not

expressed outright in her responses, but there were times when she showcased her

feelings through non-verbal cues.

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Understanding of inclusion. At the beginning of our interview, Grace's definition of educational inclusion was simply, "letting students with exceptionalities . . . have the ability to learn in a classroom just like others do." As we discussed this concept in more detail though, she began to extend her understanding to include the school and the community at large. She elaborated by saying, "I think [inclusion] is more than a place. It is outside at recess time, in activities, and games in gym class. Inclusion should be everywhere really. It should be outside in the real world." This understanding of educational inclusion implied that inclusive strategies should extend beyond the classroom into other facets of the school environment. Grace pointed out that it is not enough for students with exceptionalities to be included in the class, if they are excluded elsewhere (e.g., at recess, at soccer after school, etc.). This understanding of inclusion lent more support for creating an overall welcoming school environment (a concept that has been discussed by other participants in this study). By adopting a school or board wide inclusive philosophy, schools can create a culture that is welcoming for all students.

Grace attributed her understanding of educational inclusion to the ES program. She admitted, "Before [I enrolled in the ES program] I honestly thought that . . . even if [a student] had a slight disability they were [placed] in a different classroom." Her experiences in the field prior to the ES program were mostly working with individuals who have disabilities in clients' homes and in the community. The ES program helped Grace to contextualize disability in special educational settings. Her previous assumptions helped to point out the importance of coursework and field placement experiences prior to working in special education.

Attitude towards inclusion. Grace's attitudes toward educational inclusion were mixed. She said, "To be quite honest, yes I think [inclusion] is a great thing in some respects, but in the other respects I find it a bit of a challenge." She felt that a general education class provides students with exceptionalities with great opportunities to advance their social and academic skills. While she acknowledged the benefits, Grace also asserted that educational inclusion is not for everyone. Overall, Grace's attitude towards inclusion was summed up when she proclaimed, "I agree with inclusion to a point. High functioning [students] should be in the mainstream regular class . . . and I think the severe students should be in a separate school where they can benefit from the life skills program." Grace felt that decisions on service delivery models should be based on the individual student's level of functioning. She supported including students who are high functioning in the general education class, but did not support including students who are low functioning. Furthermore, she asserted that students who have moderate disabilities should be considered on a case-by-case basis. She shared that she has developed this attitude towards inclusion through her coursework and through her field placement experiences. She recalled an experience from her first field placement experience that helped to shape her attitude toward educational inclusion:

> There was this student [during field placement] who was non-verbal and who was developmentally delayed in all areas. For a student like that, I find it hard for them to be included in the classroom. I think they would benefit more in a contained classroom . . . where they can get that one-on-one support and at their level as well.

From her experiences, Grace discovered that students with severe needs might not benefit the same way as others from being included in the general education class. Grace pointed out that students who are low functioning could benefit both academically and socially from a separate learning environment. She felt that a separate environment would be more developmentally appropriate and give students with severe disabilities more of an opportunity to interact with their peers who are at similar levels of functioning. After much discussion, Grace asserted that students with severe disabilities should be educated in a specialized school. She thought this would also be more appropriate for medically fragile students to access the specialized care they require.

Facilitating Factor. Grace identified one major factor that she felt could enhance inclusive education—student awareness. She asserted that students should be educated about special education and different disabilities early on to help decrease fears and feelings of uncertainty. She said, "[Students] are unaware [of disability] . . . but I am sure if they knew, then they would want to be friends with them [the students with exceptionalities]." Grace implied that if students were educated on disability content, they would be more open to developing social relationships with students who have exceptionalities.

Grace felt that students needed more knowledge about special education and disability. She asserted, "[We should be] introducing the student [with an exceptionality] to the rest of the class. Maybe explain what autism is to the grade three students who don't understand why she [the girl with autism] is a bit different." Grace thought that if students were made aware of the differences and similarities among all students with and

without disabilities early on then students with exceptionalities would find more success socially. She said:

> [We should explain things] the first week . . . so they [students with exceptionalities] have friends to play with. [If they had more friends] when they are out on the playground, they wouldn't get bullied. I just think some kind of student awareness [is important].

Grace's suggestion to teach disability knowledge/awareness reflected her overall understanding that inclusion needs to be everywhere. The teachers and EAs cannot always be present to help include students with exceptionalities, especially in social contexts (e.g., out on the playground). Grace recognized that students hold a great deal of power when it comes to social inclusion. She felt that there would be more of an opportunity for social success if students were more knowledgeable about special education and disability.

Barrier. Grace also identified a factor that she believed posed a barrier to inclusive education. The barrier she observed was that educators were using non-evidence-based strategies in special education. Grace observed on her placement that EAs and other educational staff were not using the evidence-based strategies that she had been learning about in the ES program. She felt that if educators took the time to learn and use more effective strategies, it would serve to enhance the success of special education and ultimately facilitate a more inclusive approach. She recalled an experience with her supervising EA while on field placement where the EA was not using an effective strategy. Grace recalled, "The EA [would say], 'I am going to write a note to your mom!' She has been an EA for 20 years and I respect her, but for me that bothers me

because . . . it just sounds like a punishment." Regarding this experience, I asked Grace, "Is that not the way you have been trained?" She replied by saying:

No, we have not been trained this way in this program. We have been trained . . . [to use] token economies systems, reward systems, [etc.]. I am looking for something like a first and then. [For example,] 'first we do ten questions of a math sheet, then we can play 5 minutes on the computer.' I need to know what she likes, instead of 'I am going to write a bad note to your mom.' I don't know [Grace looked concerned and paused for a moment] . . . I cannot do that to my students.

From her experiences, Grace observed that some educators (i.e., EAs and teachers) might not have the knowledge and/or skills in order to utilize more effective strategies in special education. Special education is evolving quickly and it can be a challenge to stay current with the most up-to-date strategies. For this reason Grace emphasized the importance of preparation for special education through pre-service and in-service training. She spoke highly of her pre-service experiences by saying, "[the ES] program is phenomenal . . . it prepares us to be EAs." She felt that the program has helped to make her an expert in special education, especially since very few working professionals she encountered had the most up-to-date specialized knowledge and skills that she had learned in the ES program. She said,

I feel I would be more of an expert than the teacher would be. The teacher is an expert at assessing, evaluating, doing the curriculum stuff. I believe that I will be more of an expert on working with my students. This program has helped me be one [and] . . . I would like to share my knowledge with staff.

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Grace discussed a host of strategies from her coursework and was able to use evidence-based practices on some occasions during her field placement experiences. She recognized that the ES program is fairly new and not everyone has had an opportunity to learn about all the most up-to-date strategies in special education. She wanted to help prepare others for special education by sharing the knowledge and skills she has learned in the ES program.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Each of the four participants in this narrative inquiry research study had a unique

perspective. All four of the interviewees shared rich lived experiences from their

personal, educational, and professional lives. The participants shared their stories with me

and reflected upon the importance of these experiences in how they have conceptualized

their understandings and attitudes toward educational inclusion. The participants in the

current study emphasized experiences both within the ES program and their life

experiences prior to the ES program. All four women recognized that the ES program had

had an impact (to varying degrees) on their overall attitude towards educational inclusion.

For example, Anne pointed out that the ES program had simply refined her existing

beliefs about inclusion, whereas Grace acknowledged that the ES program completely

shaped her understanding of educational inclusion. Within the ES program all four of the

participants placed a heavy emphasis on the field placement component of ES program

by citing examples from their field placement experiences during the interviews. Outside

of the ES program, all four of the participants also had extensive experience in special

education/disability services. Anne and Kelly admitted that their significant life events

(e.g., Anne's experience driving her bus or Kelly's experience with her son) had a major

impact on their attitudes toward educational inclusion. This is not surprising since all four

of the participants were mature students. In addition, three of the four participants were in

the accelerated ES program, which requires students to have a prior experience in the

field or a related diploma.

The participants' interview transcripts were analyzed through an in-depth

thematic analysis that resulted in three major themes emerging from the data. The

interview transcripts were read over several times. The first read through was to identify

the patterns in the data from the interview questions. As presented in Chapter Four, the

interview questions I asked gathered information about participants' (1) understandings

of educational inclusion, (2) attitudes toward education inclusion, (3) facilitating factors

for educational inclusion, and (4) barriers to educational inclusion. I sorted the

participants' responses into these four categories. Next, I analyzed the data more deeply

by looking for similarities among participant responses. Each participant had a different

interpretation and perspective of educational inclusion, but some similarities were found

among the four participants and were identified as themes.

Thematic analysis of the data revealed three key themes: (1) Applying inclusion

theory to practice, (2) EAs: ambassadors for inclusion, and (3) A prepared special

education team. Collectively, the four women interviewed produced meaningful ideas

and I will discuss these three themes in more detail, as well as present recommendations

for policy, practice, and research in the field of special education.

Theme 1: Applying Inclusion Theory to Practice

In their responses to the interview questions, participants emphasized their

practical experiences in special education (e.g., field placements, work experiences, etc.).

Experiential learning opportunities in special education coupled with the specialized

coursework help to prepare ES students for a career as an EA in special education

settings. It is not surprising that the ES students stressed the application of theory to

practice because CAAT programs across the province place a heavy emphasis on

employability skills and practical applications of knowledge (Colleges Ontario, 2013).

Overall, the interviewees generally supported educational inclusion, but they all held less

than optimistic attitudes toward full-inclusion. In particular, three of the four participants argued that students with high needs (behaviourally, medically, or otherwise) might not be good candidates for inclusion in the general education classroom. Almost all the participants expressed that each student's unique needs should take the highest priority when making service delivery decisions. These special needs can take a variety of forms (e.g., academic needs, behavioral challenges, etc.). In general, the participants asserted that students with exceptionalities should be placed in the most enabling environment that best sets the student up for academic and social successes. Kelly pointed out that the most enabling educational setting might change as a student develops over time and should be constantly reevaluated. Two of the ES students interviewed emphasized the importance of having different service delivery options so that students could be placed in the best educational environment on a case-by-case basis. These responses echo concerns about full-inclusion presented by Kauffman and colleagues (2002). That is, students with severe behavioural and emotional disorders would benefit more from a self-contained educational environment.

Three of the participants agreed that inclusion is a good idea in theory and that ideally students should be included. All of the participants in this study, however, also pointed out the challenges of educational inclusion in practice. This distinction between theory and practice led to what Sikes and colleagues (2007) called "yes, but . . ." statements about inclusion from the participants. These "yes, but . . ." statements often start with a general agreement with the theory and end with a concern about the practical application. For example, Kelly made a "yes, but . . ." statement. When she was asked about inclusion she said, "yes, but sometimes I think it points out their disability more

than it includes them." The "yes, but . . ." phenomenon has been observed with in-service EAs in previous studies (Mackenzie, 2011; Sikes et al., 2007). It appears that much like working EAs, pre-services EAs also struggle to reconcile the ideals of inclusion with the challenges they experiences in practice. The "yes, but . . ." phenomenon is not exclusive to EAs and educational inclusion. In fact, Marshall and Ward (2004) pointed out that educational leaders often make "yes, but . . ." statements about social justice issues. In this study they discovered that principals and other leaders tended to agree with the need for social justice in schools, but found it challenging to fully implement. One of Marshall and Ward's (2004) participants pointed out, "At the rhetorical level nobody would disagree with providing children a good education" (p. 36). In the current study, the ES students' attitudes were also concerned with all students' overall educational experiences. One important point discussed by the participants was that education inclusion is a relatively new concept and there is still a lot of room for improvement. "Yes, but . . ." statements help to critically analyze the effectiveness of educational inclusion in practice, which will only better prepare special educators to work toward more inclusive ideals in the future.

The participants in the current study believed that the application of inclusion should be for all learners, not just students with special education needs. They pointed out that every learner is unique and that diversity should serve to enhance the learning experience for all students. The participants felt that in practice, inclusion was more than simply educating students with disabilities in the general education class. For the ES students, inclusion was about nurturing a positive school culture where all students felt welcome and accepted. Most important to the participants was the social component of

inclusion. Anne even asserted that the social experience of inclusion was directly correlated with the academic experience of inclusion. That is, if the student is included socially with his/her peers, they will be more likely to have academic successes.

Theme 2: EAs: Ambassadors for inclusion

Not surprisingly, the ES students interviewed placed a premium on educational support and the role of the EA in the special education team. They felt that EAs could help to better include students with exceptionalities in the classroom by providing them with specialized support. Much like Mackenzie (2011) the ES students viewed EAs as essential to the successful implementation of inclusive education. April pointed out that many students with exceptionalities are dependent on one-on-one support from EAs, and without this support, inclusion would be impossible for these students. Overall the participants strongly asserted that when trained properly and implemented correctly, EAs could further advance educational inclusion.

Grace argued that EAs are the foremost experts on their students because they work so closely with them. In addition, many EAs have specialized knowledge and skills in special education and in using evidence-based practices. In the past EAs did not have as much preparation as teachers, but now the ES program offers pre-service EAs specialized knowledge to which other staff in the school does not have access. All of the participants felt that trained EAs should work with and prepare other staff members in the school on special education's best practices. In particular, the ES students felt a responsibility to share the knowledge they had learned in the ES program with EAs who have not had this pre-service experience and with teachers who have not received this level of preparation for special education.

Unfortunately, the participants observed that in many cases EAs are not treated as experts in the special education team. Role confusion between teachers and EAs has been well documented in the literature (for example see Angelides et al., 2009) and was a concern for the participants in this study as well. The participants observed role confusion between teachers and EAs on their field placements and asserted that role confusion led to power dynamic issues in the classroom. The participants observed that EAs were often treated as low-level staff with little to contribute to the learning environment. Grace shared that she faced negativity from school staff because of her desire to be an EA. Grace said, "The teachers are saying, why are you becoming EAs, why are you doing this, there is so much more you can do. They are just negative about it." In fact, two of the participants discussed power dynamics between teachers and EAs in detail during their interview. They observed that EAs have little say in the special education team, but are asked to work directly with the students with exceptionalities. The ES students reported that this created additional challenges for them on placement because they did not want to "step on someone's toes". Nevertheless, the ES students reported that they made efforts to work with the system to support their assigned student as best as possible.

Kelly observed on her placement that working EAs were worn out and did not bother to assert themselves in the special education team because they had learned overtime that their contributions were not taken seriously in many cases. She pointed out that EAs could contribute more to inclusive education by being role models and advocates for students in special education. Now that EAs are receiving extensive preparation (i.e., through the ES program), there is a need to establish EAs as respected

professionals in the school. This will allow EAs to contribute more to the special

education team, which may advance the quality of educational inclusion.

Theme 3: A Prepared Special Education Team

Special education has evolved greatly in recent years. As a result, research on best

practices is constantly being refined. As such, the participants in the current study

emphasized the importance of all educators having up-to-date training in order to

implement best practices with students who have exceptionalities. During their field

placement experiences, all of the participants observed a need for more training.

Participants indicated that EAs, teachers, and even principals in some cases did not seem

to have adequate training in special education. The ES program helps to address the need

for EAs' pre-service preparation. Students in the ES program are required to take several

specialized classes and complete field placements in special education settings. In

contrast, teachers do not have nearly as many experiences in special education during

their pre-service program. This may be changing with the Bachelor of Education

programs in Ontario expanding to two years. In fact, the 2014 Registration Guide from

the OCT stipulates, "As of September 1, 2015, Ontario's teacher education program will

change . . . [to] include an enhanced focus in areas such as *special education* [emphasis

added], how to teach using technology, and diversity" (OCT, 2014, p. iii).

Despite the disproportional amount of pre-service training in special education

that ES students receive compared to pre-service teachers, once hired, teachers have far

more opportunities for in-service training compared to EAs. Most school boards offer a

host of professional development opportunities for teachers. In addition, teachers can take

AQ (additional qualification) courses in special education (i.e., parts one, two, and

specialist levels). These AQ courses are optional and are not a requirement for teaching in an inclusive general education class. In addition, teachers can potentially receive incentives (e.g., pay grid increases) for advancing their credentials with AQ courses. Several studies have indicated that EAs desire more training (Abbott et al., 2011; Giangreco et al., 2012; Glazzard, 2011; Moran & Abbott, 2002). The participants in the current study also expressed a need to continue updating their credentials after the ES program and expressed a desire to stay current with their knowledge and skills in special education. Both Kelly and Anne felt they would have to educate themselves in order to keep their knowledge and skills up-to-date. This may be due to the lack of in-service training available to EAs.

Kelly pointed out that special education should be delivered as a team effort. In order to be more effective, all team members need to be working together toward common goals. Collaboration can become challenging when one or more of the team members do not have the appropriate knowledge and/or skills required to implement best practices in special education. Sometimes when educators are not trained with the proper strategies, they will make decisions based on their instinct rather than using evidence-based practices. For example, Grace recalled a situation on her placement where a student with Down's syndrome in a grade three class was not completing her seatwork. Grace's supervising EA was resorting to punishment threats to modify behaviour. The EA threatened to write a negative note home to the student's mother if she did not complete her work. Grace expressed her discontent with this approach and expressed that she would have liked to use an approach based on the principles of ABA with the student to modify her latent behaviour (i.e., first-then). ABA is an effective strategy for students

with developmental disabilities, but represents only one of several evidence-based approaches that can be utilized (Dillenburger & Keenan, 2009).

Recommendations for Policy

Ontario has existing policies and documentation that helps to structure the implementation of inclusive practices across the province. For example, Policy Program Memorandum (PPM) 119 states, "all publicly funded school boards are required to develop, implement, and monitor an equity and inclusive education policy" (OME, 2013b). In general, special education policies in Ontario advocate for inclusive education, but Ontario still maintains a hierarchy of service delivery models to meet the diverse needs of all students. Therefore, full inclusion is not mandatory for all students. Participants' attitudes were in line with the OME's mandates and policies. Three of the four ES students interviewed agreed that inclusion is the best option when possible, but also pointed out the importance of having a variety of service delivery options to meet the individual needs of each student with an exceptionality.

All of the participants in this study discussed the challenge of including students who are low-functioning/high needs. As such, one policy recommendation would be for the province to develop documentation on the best practices for including students with low-functioning/high needs disabilities. The participants in this study did not operationally define low functioning, high needs or severe disability, but gave examples of students from their placement who differed significantly from their classmates in one domain or another (e.g., intellectually, behaviourally, etc.). Some examples given by the participants included students who had a behavioural disorder, developmental disability or who were medically fragile. Existing documentation from the OME is designed to help

educators better include students with exceptionalities in general, but there is not specific

documentation on students who are low functioning. Some of these documents include:

Learning for All (OME, 2013c), *Education for All* (OME, 2005), and the *IEP Resource*

Guide (2004). For example, Ontario's *Learning for All* document discusses the

importance of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in order to better include all learners

(OME, 2013c). According to the Learning for All document, "the aim of UDL . . . is to

provide access to the curriculum for *all* students, and to assist educators in designing

products and environments to make them accessible to everyone, regardless of age, skills,

or situation" (p. 14). Some policies have been developed to assist with educating the most

challenging students with exceptionalities. For example PPM 140 requires educators to

use applied behaviour analysis (ABA) with students who have ASD (OME, 2007). A

document that addresses the specific challenges associated with working with students

who have severe disabilities may allow students who are low functioning to be included

for at least part of the school day with their same-age peers. If educators, such as the

participants in this study, are uneasy about including students who are low functioning,

this may pose a barrier to equity and inclusion.

As long as the hierarchy of service delivery models is being utilized in Ontario,

the province should develop clear educational policies to assist with service delivery

decisions. These decisions can have a tremendous impact on a student's academic and

social development. Literature has suggested that including students with exceptionalities

in the regular classroom could have social (Cairns & McClatchey, 2013) and academic

(Ruijs, & Peetsma, 2009) benefits. The social and academic impact of a given service

delivery model, however, would be greatly depend on the individual student and several

other accompanying factors (e.g., level of functioning, social skills, etc.). A tool or resource with clearer criteria could help with the decision-making process and would be beneficial for parents, students, and the special educational team. A policy tightly coupled to practice, such as the one recommend here, could benefit the special education team by taking out any ambiguity or bias in the decision making process. One of the drawbacks, however, would be that the policy would leave less room for individual interpretation (Weick, 1976). Of course, the final placement decision would still be made by the IPRC on a case-by-case basis, after taking into consideration the unique needs of each individual student.

In recent years, EAs have taken on an integral role in special education. Despite the importance of EAs in special education, there are very few provincial policies in place regarding EAs in Ontario. For example, Kelly pointed out that the OME does not clearly define the EA's role in the special education team. This may be part of the reason why teachers and EAs experience role confusion and power dynamic issues. Defining the EA's role is especially important since the duties and job responsibilities have changed greatly in recent years. Since the passing of Bill 82 in 1980 special education in Ontario has evolved from a system of exclusion to now advocating for the supports necessary to have students with exceptionalities learning alongside their peers without disabilities in the general education class (Bennet et al., 2013; Brantlinger, 2006). The EA profession has also evolved and this profession is now placed at the center of special education, a far cry from EAs' clerical beginnings (Groom, 2006).

Lip sky (1980) points out that frontline or what he calls "street level" workers are the ones who have the real impact on policy changes. EAs and other members of the

special education team may have important impacts on future policy in special education. It is recommended that the OME create a standardized definition of the EA's role and duties in special education. This definition will have to build in flexibility since EAs' responsibilities are often complex, diverse, and dependent on the student(s) they are assigned to. Nevertheless, documentation that clearly asserts teacher and EA responsibilities are needed to help the special education team to deliver special education services more efficiently. Current documents in special education make little reference to EAs and their role in the special education team. For example, the *Education for All* (OME, 2005) document simply states, "[Educational] assistants, some of whom are certified to work with students with special needs, can help the regular classroom teacher provide individualized instruction for some students" (p. 114). This definition is vague and does take into account the variety of duties an EA is responsible for. The *IEP Resource Guide* (OME, 2004) goes into a little more detail by explaining:

> The [educational] assistant: helps the student with learning activities under the direction and supervision of the teacher; assists with providing appropriate accommodations as described in the IEP; monitors and records the student's achievements and progress relative to the expectations described in the IEP, under the direction and supervision of the teacher; maintains ongoing communication with the student's teachers. (p. 18)

These guidelines are helpful in asserting EAs as members of the special education team. It is recommended, however, that further documentation be developed that expands upon the EA role to discuss the teacher-EA working dynamic more clearly. Simply stating that the teacher is to direct EAs leaves far too much ambiguity for practice, especially when

teachers are not being prepared to direct EAs. In the last ten years, EAs have become further entrenched in special education and thus up-to-date documentation would be beneficial for all stakeholders in special education.

Establishing EAs as respected professionals within the special education team is vital. As such, another recommendation would be to establish a professional association for EAs. A provincial governing body might help with standardizing EAs' professional practice and in enhancing their expertise in schools. This idea was discussed briefly at the 2014 CEC provincial conference in Niagara Falls (Fitzgibbon, Hansen, Barlow, & Newman, 2014). The presenters discussed the need for an organization similar to OCT (Ontario College of Teachers) or CECE (College of Early Childhood Educators). An association such as this would help to organize EAs and would bring more awareness to the importance of EAs in special education. This may result in more public policies being developed and research being conducted about EAs. A provincial association for EAs could govern and regulate practices for the profession across the province. It is recommended that EAs be required to be registered members in order to be employed as an EA in a publicly funded school board in Ontario. It would be essential for this organization to develop partnerships with other professional bodies to help foster collaboration. An organization such as this would require the support of various stakeholders (e.g., parents, teachers, principals, etc.) in special education to ensure the stakeholders' goals do not conflict with that of the EA professional association. For example, clear protocol for EAs would need to be developed that would allow this organization to work closely and support workplace unions.

In order for the special education team to function more efficiently, proper training should be mandated as well. As such, another policy recommendation would be that all new EA hires in Ontario be required to have graduated from an ES program. The OME has suggested hiring policies for EAs, which states, "that all jurisdictions develop a hiring policy that reflects the need for Educational Assistants to have relevant post-secondary, pre-service education from an accredited college or university" (OME, 2011, 97.2.1). Although similar programs exist that have some overlap to the ES program (e.g., Developmental Services Worker program), no other single program offers students the full-range of pre-service preparation to take on the complexities of an EA's duties and responsibilities in the special education team. As such, hiring ES graduates exclusively may serve to enhance the quality of special education delivery. As a part of the ES program's provincial standard, ES graduates are required to demonstrate their abilities in each of the nine VLOs (MTCU, 2012a). These VLOs prepare students with the relevant skills to be an effective EA in the special education team. The ES program VLOs are updated periodically based on changes in the industry standards. As such, graduates of the ES program are appropriately prepared to take on the role of EA in current special education settings.

Hiring ES graduates exclusively for EA positions offers more support for the establishment of a governing body for EAs. Much like teachers (i.e., OCT), all EAs should be required to be a member in good standing with an EA provincial association. It is recommended that in order to become a member, one must have graduated from an ES diploma program. Similar programs from other provinces or countries could be subjected to a case-by-case evaluation, much like the CECE's "Individual Assessment of

Educational Credentials" procedure. This allows the CECE to consider membership of applicants who have equivalent training from across Canada and internationally (CECE, 2015). An EA governing body could also establish EA specific AQ courses (e.g., ASD specialist, behaviour specialist, etc.) to enhance the in-service training opportunities and expertise for EAs.

For teachers, the Special Education Part One AQ course should be a minimal requirement once employed with a publically funded school board in Ontario. All teachers will likely come in contact with students who have special education needs at some point during their career. Having at least a rudimentary understanding of special education will help to advance educational inclusion efforts. That is, a basic knowledge for a range of exceptionalities and an aptitude for constructing and implementing special education programming based on best practices. A policy change requiring this AQ would better prepare teachers with the knowledge and skills to promote educational inclusion in their classrooms. Perhaps school boards could require this AQ course be taken within the first five years of employment and it could be part of every new teacher's professional development plan. As mentioned earlier, the Bachelor of Education may also be helping to prepare teachers for inclusive education in Ontario because the new two-year program will have more of a focus on special education (OCT, 2014).

Recommendations for Practice

EAs often work closely with students who have exceptionalities. Applying inclusion theory to practice needs to be a team effort and EAs play an important role in the special education team. The current study has helped to point out that there are stark differences between inclusion in theory and in practice. All of the participants in this

study indicated that they fully support inclusion theoretically, but found it challenging to apply educational inclusion in practice. This challenge will be better met by adopting a team approach between EAs and classroom teachers. According to three of the participants' observations from their field placement, EAs and teachers had difficulty collaborating. School boards should aim to develop what Kelly called "A community of learners". This would enhance the overall quality of inclusive education and help educators to more effectively utilize evidence-based strategies.

The participants in this study also indicated that they had observed successful and unsuccessful examples of inclusion during their field placement experiences. For this reason it is also recommended that educators constantly evaluate the effectiveness of their approaches to inclusive education. For example, data collection can help educators to observe trends in student's behaviours and guide their educational program or techniques (Heflin & Alaimo, 2007). According to participants' responses in this study, it is especially important to consider how well the student is being included socially with his or her peers. To assist with this practice, EAs or teachers could start social groups that are based around common interests among students with and without disabilities. Research has indicated that this can be an effective means of teaching social skills and helping to foster relationships between students with and without exceptionalities (Sartini, Knight, & Collins, 2013). In addition, Koegel and colleagues (2012) found that adolescents with ASD were more likely to engage socially with their peers in a club centered on the student with ASD's perseverative interests. EAs, teachers, or even students could set up such a club to enhance social opportunities and foster educational inclusion.

Educators working in special education should have a theoretical understanding of

inclusion. All of the participants pointed out that inclusion is ideal in theory. Even by idealizing the concept of inclusion though, it becomes something to strive for in practice rather than a location of service delivery or a predetermined set of conditions. The practical challenges of inclusion should be taught alongside the theory of inclusion in pre-service programs. This strategy will help special educators in training develop a greater understanding of inclusion and be better able to troubleshoot the barriers to inclusion as they are encountered on the job.

EAs can enhance inclusive education by providing additional support to students with exceptionalities. In order to be taken seriously as professionals, EAs need opportunities to act as experts in the special education team, where they can share their specialized knowledge and skills. For example, EAs should be included in all the meetings regarding the student(s) they are assigned to (e.g., IPRC meetings). After their parents, EAs often know the students who have exceptionalities the best due to their closeness on a day-to-day basis. In my experiences, EAs and teachers are not always included in these meetings.

Katz and colleagues found that the presence of an EA in the general education classroom could socially exclude students with exceptionalities. Two of the ES students in the current study also expressed concerns about this. April recommended an alternative to the traditional deployment of EAs for special education. She suggested we have an EA in every class to support all students. All students could benefit from extra support and having one in every class for all students would help to normalize the practice. Although the cost would be immense, this would help to address the growing number of students receiving special education services (OME, 2015).

The special education team can help to advance educational inclusion efforts if all members are working together and are utilized properly. The participants in this study observed that EAs and teachers encountered challenges when working together in inclusive classes. Educators need to receive more guidance on how to collaborate effectively. Teachers and EAs can look to the literature on co-teaching for models on how to effectively share a classroom with one another. Cook and Friend (1995) define co-teaching as: "two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse or blended group of students in a single physical space." Based on this definition, the relationship between an EA and teacher in an inclusive classroom could be considered a co-teaching relationship. The EA role has become more instructional in recent years, most often in the form of direct instruction with a student or students with special education needs. As a result, teachers and EAs often share teaching responsibilities in an inclusive classroom. The co-teaching model that applies to the teacher-EA relationship is known as the supplementary teaching model or the one teach/one assist model of co-teaching. This model traditionally utilizes a special education teacher as the educator providing support to the class, while the classroom teacher instructs. With EAs, the classroom teacher takes the lead because they are tasked with directing EAs and have more preparation for general education. While the classroom teacher instructs, the EA provides additional support to all students in the class.

The recommendation to better prepare EAs and teachers to work alongside one another will require a clarification of the line that divides the duties of EAs and those of teachers. ES programs and pre-service teacher education programs should collaborate by creating a joint class or a series of workshops where students from both programs can

have opportunities to problem solve case studies based on real classroom experiences. ES students and pre-service teachers could work together to problem solve a scenario that presents a clear power dynamic issue between the teacher and the EA. For example, the pre-service students could role-play a scenario where a teacher is upset because he/she feels the EA has overstepped his/her boundaries by disciplining a student for talking out during a silent reading period. The pre-service students could then reflect on the scenario and develop an action plan to prevent a situation like this from occurring in practice. Students could also discuss the implications of such an interaction. These types of collaborative activities may help to better prepare both sets of educators with the diplomatic skills necessary to successfully unify the special education team. In addition, this process may help teachers and EAs develop professional contacts early in their careers.

Another recommendation at the pre-service level would be that pre-service teachers should be required to have a field placement experience in at least one special education environment (e.g., self-contained class). Preparation for special education needs to include practical components where learners have an opportunity to apply theory to practice in a variety of situations. Teachers could benefit greatly from early hands-on experience in special education during their pre-service years.

Once hired, educators should continue to expand upon their credentials through in-service training. This is particularly important because the milieu of special education is continuing to evolve. In order to support inclusive education initiatives, teachers and EAs should engage in team building activities in order to promote collaboration. As Grace suggested, professional development (PD) days should focus more on special

education and strategies that promote inclusion. From my experiences, EAs are not always included in professional development days with teachers. Actively including EAs' input for PD days centered on special education may be an ample opportunity to assert EAs as professionals in the special education team. This may also give EAs rich opportunities to collaborate with teachers.

Recommendations for Research

In recent years there has been a great deal of research published on inclusive education (see Chapter Two). As discussed earlier, Avramidis and colleagues (2002) pointed out that the concept of educational inclusion is often inconsistently defined and implemented. There is a lack of standardization of what constitutes inclusion, which results in disconnects between theory and practice among practitioners and researchers alike. Research should aim to bridge the gap between theoretical understandings and practical applications of inclusion. In order to address this need, it is recommended that future research studies examine special educators' applications of inclusion in order to identify and promote best practices. These studies should seek to gain a greater understanding of the strategies that have proven to be successful in including students with disabilities in the general education classroom and in the school at large. In addition, these studies need to be disseminated to teachers, EAs, and other special education team members in order to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

The participants in the current research study emphasized the social component of educational inclusion. As such, future research should focus more on the students' attitudes toward inclusion and the actual friendships that are developed in an inclusive classroom. In particular, researchers should examine the behavioural implications of

students' attitudes toward disability and inclusion. Although the current research study attempts to examine attitudes, actual behaviours are not measured (i.e., implementation of inclusive practices) and K-12 students' perspectives are not accounted for. Future studies should consider utilizing triangulation, where behavioural observations and field notes could be included in the research inquiry. Behavioural manifestations of attitude toward inclusion can have a tremendous impact on social experiences for students with special needs.

There is a great need to develop and implement more objective research designs that seek to measure students' observable behaviours inside and outside of the class. Such studies would seek to document the social treatment of students with disabilities. This is necessary because even if interventions can help to enhance students' attitudes toward disability and inclusion, attitudes may not necessarily translate to actual friendships being forged between students with and without disabilities. In fact, Litvack, Ritchie, and Shore (2011) reported that students' attitudes toward disability were overall positive, but students' friendships and interactions with their classmates who had disabilities were still scarce. The recommendation here is to study students' attitudes alongside their behaviours in order to help foster social relationships for students with exceptionalities. One cannot achieve complete objectivity even when measuring students' overt behaviours. Social desirability can occur when observing students' behaviours. Participants often change their behaviour if they know they are being observed—a research phenomenon known as the *Hawthorne effect* (Merrett, 2006). In order to address this, researchers could utilize implicit association tests of attitudes toward persons with disabilities (Thomas, Vaughn, Doyle, & Bubb, 2014) and/or covert observation

strategies.

Future research in special education should include the voice of EAs more often. The numbers of studies examining the EA profession seems to be on the rise. In fact, Giangreco and colleagues (2010) found that "the rate of research on [EAs] has more than doubled since [2001], and the proportion of studies published in scholarly journals has increased. This suggests that paraprofessional issues are a growing area of interest and importance in the field" (p. 44). There are still many fewer studies that investigate EAs compared to teachers in special education. When one considers the importance of EAs in special education, it seems essential to continue conducting research to addresses this gap in the literature. The current study looked at pre-service EAs, but in-service EAs also have a unique perspective to share as the frontline workers in special education. Many EAs work directly with students who have exceptionalities and thus have an intricate knowledge of their students.

Currently there is a paucity of research on EAs in Canadian settings. There is a general need for more research on EAs' perceptions of their role, their attitudes toward inclusion, and their working relationships with teachers. Working EAs' attitudes toward inclusion may be different from pre-service EAs because work experiences may have influenced their attitudes overtime. Many EAs have been able to see first-hand the effects of different service delivery models and the impact they have had on students' academic and social development. It would be interesting to interview career EAs who have been working in special education for a long time. These veteran EAs could share how their role has changed in recent history. In addition, it would be worthwhile to compare the experiences of veteran and novice EAs to see if there are any major differences in their

attitudes toward educational inclusion.

The current research study is the first, to the researcher's knowledge, to investigate ES students' attitudes toward educational inclusion. As such, there is much need for additional research in this area. It is recommended that future studies continue the investigation of pre-service EAs' attitudes toward inclusion and their perspectives on a variety of education phenomenon (e.g., diversity, assistive technology, etc.). The current study has helped to showcase that ES students have a unique and meaningful perspective to share. In addition, it points out the importance of pre-service training and practical experiences in special education. The ES students discussed their impression of inclusive education largely from their practical experiences (e.g., field placement). In future research, it would be interesting to investigate mentor EAs' experiences with ES students on field placement. Such a study could interview pre-service and supervising EA dyads and discuss their perceptions of work experience and pre-service preparation. Including supervising EAs' experiences and perspectives could help to give a fuller picture of ES programs' field placement experiences. The resulting narratives may have important implication for the way in which the ES programs' field placement components are structured. For example, Grace mentioned that her supervising EA suggested the ES field placements should be one big block (i.e., five days a week for three weeks) rather than a few days a week (e.g., two days a week for eight weeks) while concurrently taking classes. Grace's supervising EA felt this would be more effective in simulating the job of an EA, but the structure of the ES program at Moxie College did not allow for this flexibility.

Although a large body of attitudinal research is quantitative, studies measuring

EAs' attitudes toward inclusion are primarily qualitative. The current study investigates ES students' attitudes toward educational inclusion qualitatively, however, future studies in this field should consider different research methodologies (e.g., mixed methods or quantitative approaches) to address this research question from a variety of viewpoints. For example, a future research study could adapt a metric designed to measure pre-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and measure ES students' attitudes quantitatively. No existing metric that specifically measures EAs' or ES students' attitudes exists to the researcher's knowledge. Searches for such a metric were done using ERIC, the Web of Knowledge, and PsycInfo search engines. Bennett and Gallangher (2013) adapted two existing attitudinal metrics to measures EAs', teachers', and job coaches' attitudes toward inclusion. Developing a specific questionnaire for measuring EAs' attitudes toward inclusion would allow a researcher to increase sample sizes (i.e., measure the attitudes of more pre-service or in-service EAs). One drawback of this approach, however, would be that such a metric would not be capable of delving deeply into each participant's stories and individual conceptualizations of inclusion. The current study points out the importance of an individual approach because each of the participants had a slightly different understanding of inclusion. In addition, these understandings were often shaped by their personal experiences.

It is recommended that future studies utilize a variety of research designs to develop a deeper understanding of how the ES programs impact students' attitudes toward inclusion. For example, it would be worthwhile to follow-up with the ES students from this study into the beginning years of their careers. It would be interesting to measure ES students' attitudes toward inclusion longitudinally to see if their attitudes

change over time as they get more hands on experience in the classroom as EAs. A longitudinal study would allow a researcher to observe changes in attitude over time, as well as make conjectures about the possible determinant factors for attitudinal change (e.g., classroom experience, burnout, etc.). For example, an ES student may have supported educational inclusion as a student, but may not support educational inclusion as a working EA. The continuity of participants' attitudes could have important implications on EAs' overall quality of praxis.

An alternative to a longitudinal design would be to conduct comparative studies. A researcher could examine attitudinal differences between students in different ES programs across the province (i.e., different CAATs). An alternative comparative study would be to investigate the differences in attitudinal scores between students in the one year fast-track intensive programs and students in the regular two-year program. A final idea for a comparative study would be to research the differences in attitudes between first and second year students in a two-year ES program. This could have important implications on the overall structure of the ES program and the way in which curriculum in the program is delivered (e.g., coursework, placement experiences, etc.).

Limitations

Although this study makes a novel contribution to the field of special education in Ontario, it is not without its limitations. To address the limitations of this study I will follow the suggestions for trustworthiness in qualitative research outlined by Shenton (2004). Shenton's measure of trustworthiness examines the extent to which the qualitative research achieves credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These four concepts loosely correlate with questions of internal validity,

external validity, reliability, and objectivity respectively, but better captures the nature of qualitative inquiries.

The first limitation concerns the transferability of the study. The sample consisted of only four final year ES students from one large CAAT in Ontario. The participants by no means represent the attitudes of the population of interest (i.e., final year ES students across Ontario). In fact, the participants are not even representative of the majority of those in the ES programs at Moxie College. The coordinator of the ES programs at Moxie College shared some basic demographic information which indicated that in 2015 Moxie College's ES students were 87% female and mostly between the ages of 21 and 25. All four interviewees were mature students, women, and only one of the ES students was enrolled in the two year ES program. All final year ES students at Moxie College (approximately 65 students) were contacted to participate in this study, but only four responded to be interviewed. As a result there may be a non-response bias (Berg, 2005). That is, those who chose not to respond may differ systematically from those who volunteered to be interviewed. The ES students who decided to participate may have had more interest in the concept of educational inclusion than those who did not participate. For example, Kelly reported that she was taking additional courses through Athabasca University on inclusion. This narrative inquiry study focused deeply on each individual's personal experiences. Any variation in participants' experiences would have resulted in a very different interpretation of the data. As a result the themes and subsequent recommendations may have been very different.

As such, the findings should be interpreted with caution and should not be generalized beyond the experiences of these four individuals. This study follows a

narrative inquiry design and thus did not have intentions of generalization. The intention was to better understand the attitudes of a few ES students who were willing to share their personal stories with me. To this end, the purpose of the study was achieved, however, the results of this study only partially answer the main research question (i.e., *What are final year ES students' attitudes toward educational inclusion?*). To enhance the transferability of this research, further research studies should be conducted that employ more diverse samples of ES students in order to better understand their attitudes toward educational inclusion.

Social desirability may be another limitation of this research inquiry. That is, participants may have responded to the interview questions based on perceived social or political correctness rather than based on their true attitudes toward educational inclusion. If participants did not share their authentic attitudes, the credibility of the study would be compromised. To enhance the credibility of the study, I tried to remain as neutral as possible in my responses to participants. During the interview process I tried to conceal my own attitudes toward inclusion from the participants because I did not want to influence their responses. At the same time, I wanted to maintain authentic conversations without creating an environment that seemed interrogative, a point that was stressed by Lawson and colleagues (2006).

To enhance confirmability I emphasized that there are no right or wrong answers and encouraged participants to share their interpretation of their personal experiences. Despite these efforts, it is possible my presence may have enhanced the likelihood of socially desirable responses. That is, the participants may have tried to align their attitudes toward inclusion with that of mine. At the end of the second and fourth

interview, both Anne and Grace asked me what my attitudes toward inclusion were. This suggests that the participants did not know what my personal attitudes toward inclusion were during the interview process. In addition, the variety of answers found in the interview transcripts suggests honesty from the participants. That is, participants shared stories that emphasized both attitudes that supported inclusion and attitudes that opposed inclusion. One of the inherent challenges in attitudinal research is that there is no way to know whether the participants answered in socially desirable or authentic ways.

There were also some methodological limitations that should be addressed in subsequent research studies. For example, I only had four ES students respond to the call for participants. If there had been a great deal of interest among ES students at Moxie College, I may have selected four or five participants to be interviewed from a larger pool of interested students. This would have helped to enhance the representation of Moxie College's ES programs by diversifying the sample. I developed the interview's guiding questions because there were no existing research studies/interview questions that investigate ES students' attitudes toward educational inclusion. Some of the questions were inspired from similar studies in the field, but most of the questions were created for the purpose of this study (see Glazzard 2011; Hemmings & Woodcock, 2011; McCray & McHatton, 2011). Dependability was weak because this is the first study to measure ES students' attitudes toward inclusion, but future studies could utilize my guiding questions to enhance dependability. Prompts in the interview often came from my advanced knowledge of the ES programs and my experience working in special education. Therefore, it may be important to replicate this study with an interviewer who has experience with EAs and ES programs. It may be worthwhile for future studies to

consider bringing ES students together for a focus group or consider utilizing

triangulation. For example it may be worthwhile to examine field placement

reflections/field notes, conduct interviews, and measuring participants' attitudes using a

quantitative questionnaire. Exploring the phenomenon in such a way would provide a

researcher with a several vantage points to observe and measure ES students' attitudes

toward educational inclusion.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

EAs play an important role within the special education team. They are often responsible, in conjunction with the classroom teacher, for implementing special education programming. In an inclusive environment the support of EAs could have a great impact on the overall success of students with special education needs. As such, it is important that EAs are prepared to take on their role as frontline workers in special education. To meet this need Ontario CAATs have developed ES programs. ES programs are relatively new in Ontario CAATs and offer much needed pre-service preparation to aspiring EAs. This intensive education is necessitated by the evolution of EAs' role in special education, the increase in the number of students in Ontario receiving special education services (OME, 2015), and the push for more inclusive policies and practices in Ontario's K-12 schools (OME, 2013b). The aim of the current study was to examine final year ES students' attitudes toward educational inclusion. Literature examining teachers' and EAs' attitudes toward educational inclusion have implied that educators' attitudes toward inclusion can have an impact on the extent to which inclusive practices are implemented in practice (Avramidis, et al., 2000; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Lawson et al., 2006).

I do not know of any other studies investigating ES students' attitudes toward educational inclusion. In fact, no studies have been found with ES students in Ontario in any capacity. ES students represent an important unheard voice in Ontario's special education literature. This study is the first of its kind and therefore helps to address a gap in the literature. Narrative inquiry was employed in order to explore this topic in depth and identify recommendations for future policy, practice, and research. The participants

consisted of four students enrolled in their final semester of an ES program at Moxie College. I was able to collect rich and meaningful data from these four participants because as mature students they all had a great deal of lived experiences to share.

The main research question for the current study was: *What are final year ES students' attitudes toward educational inclusion?* This study begins to address this question through the use of semi-structured interviews. From these interviews, I discovered that for the most part, the ES students in this study supported educational inclusion, but their attitudes were malleable depending on the circumstances (e.g., severity of disability, social readiness of the student, etc.). Much like teachers' attitudes toward inclusion (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; de Boer et al., 2011), ES students were more open to partial inclusion as compared to full inclusion. In addition, the participants generally supported the idea of educational inclusion, but expressed challenges with inclusion in practice. This phenomenon has come to be known as the "yes, but . . ." phenomenon and has been observed in previous studies that have investigated EAs' attitudes toward inclusion (Mackenzie, 2011; Sikes et al., 2007).

Through thematic analysis, three themes emerged from the ES students' interviews. Participants discussed (1) the importance of applying theory to practice in special education, (2) the importance of EAs in implementing educational inclusion, and (3) the importance of adequate training for all members of the special education team. It is not surprising that the participants discussed these three concepts in depth. The first theme may have arisen because EAs work on the frontline of special education where the application of theory is particularly important. The second theme may have emerged because ES students get the opportunity to work alongside EAs during their field

placement experiences and see first-hand the importance of their role in special

education. The ES students' field placement experiences were strongly represented in

their interview responses. For all of the participants, it seemed that their field placement

experiences played an important role in their attitude development. The final theme may

have developed because ES students receive specialized preparation for special

education. Many working EAs and teachers have not received this type of intensive

preparation for special education through their pre-service education. At the same time,

the ES students interviewed recognized the importance and the need to train all educators

in the school because evidence-based practices in special education are continuing to

evolve. The themes discovered through this study helped to produce important

recommendations for future policy, practice, and research.

The current study allowed participants the opportunity to reflect upon their

experiences (both in and out of the ES program), consider their own attitudes toward

education inclusion, and discuss their future roles as EAs. In addition, the current study

makes a contribution to the field of special education in Ontario by giving a voice to ES

students in the literature. It helps to point out the importance of EAs in special education

and the relevance of ES programs in Ontario CAATs. As special education continues to

evolve, ES programs are going to play an important role in preparing pre-service EAs for

inclusive education. EAs who are trained in ES programs will be better prepared to

implement high quality special education services. Trends in provincial policies (e.g.,

PPM 119) suggest that the province of Ontario will continue to promote inclusive

education into the foreseeable future (OME, 2013b). In order to work toward achieving

educational inclusion, educators need the appropriate education (e.g., found in the ES

program) to prepare them with the knowledge and skills to take on their role in special education. The participants in the current study identified that there is still a great deal of room for improvement as we strive for more inclusive education in Ontario. The future of special education will be presented with challenges and barriers in upcoming years. Together with the special education team, ES graduates (as working EAs) will play an important role in the pursuit of truly inclusive education for all students.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

Appendix B: Guiding Interview Questions

Appendix C: Letter of Consent

Appendix D: Letter of Information

Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

Q1: What is your <u>age</u>? [*write on line provided*] → _____ years old

Q2: What is your <u>gender?</u> [*write on line provided*] → _____

Q3: Do you, a close friend, or a family member have a disability? [*circle one answer*]

A) No (*go to Q4*)

B) Yes

↓

i) What is your relation to this person (e.g., close friend, sibling, etc.)?

Q4: What Educational Support <u>program</u> are you in? [*circle one answer*]

    A) 2-year program Educational Support program

    B) 1-year (fast track intensive) Educational Support program

Q5: What is your <u>highest level</u> of education? [*circle one answer*]

    A) I have <u>some</u> college education

    B) I have <u>completed</u> a college program and have earned a <u>certificate or diploma</u>

    C) I have <u>some</u> university education

    D) I have <u>completed</u> a university undergraduate <u>degree</u>

    E) Other (e.g., Masters, Ph.D., etc.) [*please specify*]:_____

Q6: Please list any other <u>professional development</u> or <u>training certificates</u> you have obtained (e.g., PECS training, BMS training, etc.).

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Q7: My <u>placement experiences </u>in the Educational Support program have been…

[*circle all that apply*]

A) …in a general education classroom supporting students with special education needs

B) …in a separate or self-contained class supporting students with special education needs

C) Other [*please specify*]:

_____

_____

_____

Q8: Please list any other experiences you have related to this field:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Appendix B: Guiding Interview Questions

1) How do you personally define 'educational inclusion'?

Potential prompt: How did you develop this understanding? What did you learn about inclusion in the educational support program?

2) Can you please tell me about your attitudes toward educational inclusion?

Potential prompts: Do you think it is good or bad? Why? Should all students with identified exceptionalities be included in the general education class? Why or why not? How would this work? Is it possible?

3) Who and what in your life do you think have influenced your attitudes toward inclusion?

Potential prompts: What role has the ES program played in this? What did you learn about inclusion in the educational support program? What other experiences have influenced your attitudes?

4) What do you think is needed for inclusion to be successful?

Potential prompts: Have you had an opportunity to learn, observe, or implement any of these ideas? Why do you think these things are so important?

5) What do you feel are some barriers to inclusion?

Potential prompts: Why do you think that this is a barrier? How might this barrier be overcome? What role might an EA play in this?

6) In an ideal world (without these barriers), what would inclusion look like?

Potential prompts: Do you think this is possible to obtain? Why or why not?

7) Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your personal attitudes toward inclusionary education?

Potential prompts: Ask about anything not discussed indicated on demographic question (e.g., family member with disability). Why did they choose the ES program? What other life events have led you to choose this profession? Any plans after graduation?

Other prompts to consider throughout:

Can you give me an example of a time when this occurred?

What did you do (behavioural component of attitude)?

What did you think/believe about that (cognitive component of attitude)?

How did that make you feel (affective component of attitude)?

Appendix C: Letter of Consent

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: Pre-service educational assistants' attitudes towards inclusion

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by John Freer, Masters Student at the University of Windsor. The results of this research will contribute to his Master's thesis.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into pre-service EAs' attitudes toward inclusion. Specifically, the research is interested in answering the question—what are final year Educational Support (ES) students' attitudes toward inclusion?

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

Participate in an interview and complete a demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire will take about ten minutes to complete. The interview will take approximately an hour and twenty minutes (total time: 1.5 hours). For the purposes of clarification, the researcher may contact you after the initial interview. You will also be contacted to ensure the accuracy of the transcribed interviews—a process referred to as member checking.

The interviews will be semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews are interviews that are guided by a set of open-ended questions. The interviewer will ask you questions and you will respond. This should result in a conversation that is guided by the questions, rather than a simple question and answer session.

All interviews will be audio recorded. Please see the audio-recording consent form. The researcher intends to capture the essence of your experience and thus will transcribe the interviews word-for-word while taking anecdotal notes on gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, etc.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

This study presents low risk to you as a participant. Should you choose to participate, you will give informed consent, have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime before member checking, and will be given access to the results of the study.

You will be asked to discuss your attitudes toward educational inclusion. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, you can expand upon questions and discuss your own personal experiences. These discussions may cause some feelings of discomfort if you have had a negative experience with special education services (e.g., yourself, your children, etc.).

You will be reminded of your right to withdraw verbally at each point of contact. In addition, you will be reminded verbally that responses will be kept confidential, will not be judged, and in no way will this impact your academic, professional, or personal lives.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

The findings of this study will have important implications for those involved. You will be asked to reflect upon your own attitudes towards inclusive education. Engaging in this meta-cognitive activity will allow you to better understand yourself, your attitudes, and how this may influence your praxis as an EA. After participating, you may be able to better assert your educational philosophy and this may influence your pedagogical techniques. This study will help the researcher to ascertain a greater understanding of pre-service EAs attitudes towards inclusionary education and the role Ontario ES programs play in shaping these attitudes. The way in which pre-service EAs view themselves personally, academically, and professionally may profoundly impact their attitudes towards inclusion and consequently may shape the

future of special education implementation.

COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

There will be no compensation for participation.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. The audio recording of the interview will be deleted after transcription and pseudonyms (i.e., fake names) will be used to identify all participants. In addition, you will be reminded verbally prior to the start of the interview that your responses will remain confidential and will not be judged. All data on this study will be stored on a password-protected laptop with no identifying information. Copies of the demographic questionnaire and interview transcriptions will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and will not be identifiable by your real name. After member checking, your personal contact information will be shredded.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any point during encounters with the researcher. You can retrospectively withdraw from the study up until you have approved the transcripts of the interview. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS

The researcher will email a link to the published study after it's completion (Summer or Fall 2015) with a reader friendly summary attached.

SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

These data may be used in subsequent studies, in publications, and in presentations.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact: Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4; Telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3948; e-mail: ethics@uwindsor.ca.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel to contact John Freer via email at freerj@uwindsor.ca.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the information provided for the study: *Pre-service educational assistants' attitudes toward inclusion* as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

_____
Name of Participant

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

_____   _____
Signature of Investigator   Date

LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: Pre-service educational assistants' attitudes towards inclusion

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by John Freer, Masters Student at the University of Windsor. The results of this research will contribute to his Master's thesis.

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SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

_____   _____
Signature of Investigator   Date

VITA AUCTORIS

NAME: John Freer

PLACE OF BIRTH: Windsor, ON

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