CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The social interaction of students with disabilities with non-handicapped peers is an important component of inclusive education (Haring 1991; Sailor 1989). It is one of the key elements for preparing students with disabilities for future independence and job opportunities in the community. Its importance in the inclusion process is so pervasive that it warrants close scrutiny to explore the effectiveness of the social interaction for students with disabilities, not only in the general education classroom, but during unstructured periods of the day when students are permitted to be the most social with the least adult intervention.

The purpose of this study is to examine if and how teachers structure their classrooms to promote social skills to encourage interaction among students and analyze whether these skills are generalized by students without disabilities to include peers with disabilities during lunch and recess when teacher prompts are not always available. Several issues prompt the significance of investigating the social interaction among students with and without disabilities in general education classrooms. First, federal mandates that support the education of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment suggest that students with mild to severe disabilities are likely participants in the general education classroom. Second, it is suggested that social interaction between students with disabilities and their typical peers is an important element of the inclusion process (Sailor 1989). Finally,
the stressed importance of social interaction in the inclusion process validates the necessity to assess the effectiveness of including students with disabilities in the general education setting for the purpose of social interaction.

This chapter begins with a brief historical overview of the legislation that has influenced special education policy and reform. Federal mandates have spurred changes in placement options for students with mild to severe disabilities. Students with mild to moderate disabilities have the right to be educated in the general education classroom with supports. The overview describes the extreme changes in options of educational placements for students with moderate to severe disabilities and explains the increase of inclusive settings. Secondly, the literature on social interaction in the general education classroom among students with and without disabilities in the last three decades is examined. A more detailed description of the literature on social interaction in general education settings will follow in Chapter Two. Finally, the significance of social interaction among classmates in the general education setting and some suggested strategies to support interaction are explored. Detailed strategies to encourage interaction among classmates are defined in Chapter Two.

**HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142) spurred a major change for special education that broadened how and where students with disabilities are educated. Educating students with disabilities in the general education setting has become more prevalent since its passage. Public Law 94-142’s mandate to provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least
restrictive environment (LRE) for handicapped students has encouraged the integration of students with disabilities into the general education setting to the greatest extent possible with the appropriate services and supports.

Prior to 1970, students with disabilities were primarily educated in separate facilities or classrooms. The 1954 Brown vs. the Board of Education Supreme Court decision influenced not only racial school discrimination, but also the integration of students with handicaps in the public schools. Yet, it wasn’t until the early 1970’s that public school districts were legally challenged to provide education for students with disabilities which resulted in several major court decisions in favor of students with handicaps who sought access to public education. In 1971, the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) brought a class action suit against the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania on behalf of all mentally retarded persons between the ages of 6 and 21 who had been excluded from education and training in the public schools. The plaintiffs cited their rights under the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution. A stipulation and a consent agreement resolved the dispute. The stipulation stated that no mentally retarded child could be placed in a special education program or excluded from public school without due process. The consent agreement stated that all mentally retarded children must be provided a free and public education.

The following year, 1972, saw Mills vs. the Board of Education of the District of Columbia, a class action suit in which plaintiffs alleged violation of due process and sought redress under the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution. The suit was brought on behalf of 18,000 out of 22,000 students with mental retardation,
behavior problems, hyperactivity, epilepsy, and physical disabilities in the Washington D.C. area who were denied or excluded from public education (Osborne 1996; Yell 1998). These cases preceded major legislation that currently influences educational policies. Section 504 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 have bolstered the integration of students with handicaps into the general education setting.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 applies to all persons with disabilities regardless of age. It protects the civil rights of students with handicaps against discrimination in any public school receiving federal assistance. Such handicaps may include asthma, attention deficit disorder hyperactivity (ADHD), Tourette’s syndrome, diabetes, allergies, AIDS, arthritis, and students without disabilities who are treated as if they have a disability. “Discrimination refers to unequal treatment of qualified students with disabilities based solely on the basis of the disability” (Yell 1998, p.104). Students with disabilities must be allowed equal access to the same educational opportunities, services, and programs as their non-handicapped peers. Schools must make reasonable modifications or adjustments to assure that discrimination does not occur.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL. 94-142) created substantive and procedural rights for children with disabilities (Hehir and Gamm 1999). The handicaps may include students with mental and physical impairments. Among the rights established by PL.94-142 for students with handicaps is the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) with access to necessary supports and services, including:
Procedures to assure that to the maximum extent appropriate, handicapped children, including children in public and private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not handicapped, and that special classes, separate schooling or other removal of handicapped children from the regular education environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the handicap is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (Barbacovi & Clelland, n.d., p.15)

Students also are assured the right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Students with disabilities can attend a local public school at public expense. They may be educated in the general education classroom with the special education support and services delivered within that general education classroom. If it appears that such a setting is inappropriate, it is the responsibility of the school district to prove that adequate supplementary aids and services were provided, but could not effectively meet the needs of the special education student in the general education placement.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was revised and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. The revisions added Autism and Traumatic Brain Injured students under the protection of IDEA. It was again revised in 1997. Among the revisions was the participation of general education teachers to develop Individual Education Plans (IEP) for handicapped students, funding, discipline of students with disabilities, and evaluation guidelines for students with handicaps.

During the 1970’s, enrollment of disabled students in separate educational facilities dropped significantly. Separate classrooms (usually self-contained) for students with special needs located in general education schools were likely
considered the least restrictive environment. Students with disabilities in self-contained classrooms were often mainstreamed or integrated into general education classrooms such as gym, lunch, music, and art classes. The participation in general education classrooms such as math and reading generally occurred when academically appropriate.

In 1986, Madeleine Will, assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, initiated a policy that encourage students with learning disabilities to be educated in the regular education classroom with pullout services and supports (Rights 1997, p.168; Underwood and Mead 1995). This is referred to as the Regular Education Initiative (REI). Some researchers and educators interpret the REI for students with mild disabilities. Others perceive REI to apply to all children with disabilities, regardless of severity of the disability. Over the years, the Regular Education Initiative (REI) eventually led to inclusion of students with severe disabilities into the general education classroom with the provision of special education supports and services within the general education setting.

Researchers who support students with mild disabilities, while recognizing the value of REI, typically call for a continuum of services (Baker and Zigmond 1990; Baker and Zigmond 1995; Manset and Semmel 1997). The general education classroom may provide a setting to interact with typical peers; however, it may not incorporate teaching strategies that adequately address the learning difficulties of students with mild disabilities. The special instruction that has been traditionally delivered mostly by special educators in a separate setting may be difficult to achieve with full inclusion in a general education setting because of greater class size and
limited teacher availability for individualized instruction. A range of services that include the general education classroom, pull-out services, and/or the self-contained special education classroom, provide options of instruction that may better address the specific needs of students with disabilities. However, the social interaction of students with mild disabilities is also a consideration.

Advocates for students with severe disabilities are likely to support full inclusion in a general education setting (Sailor, 1989; Stainback, Stainback et al. 1994; Villa, Thousand et al. 1992). Special education is viewed as a service, not a place. Special education services or supports can be provided within the general education classroom. Students with severe disabilities are encouraged to attend their neighborhood schools in the general education classroom with age appropriate peers, where they are to receive the necessary supports and services. The social component of their education is emphasized. Moreover, the social interaction with non-disabled peers may provide appropriate models of behaviors for students with disabilities that are not likely to be obtained in a segregated educational setting.

Since the early 1970’s, the integration of students with disabilities into general education settings has evolved from mainstreaming only the more cognitively able student, who had the ability to access the general education curriculum appropriately, to the current option of enrolling students with mild to severe disabilities as full participants in the general education classroom with their age appropriate peers. During the past three decades, “integration,” “mainstreaming,” and “inclusion” have all been used to describe the merging of students with disabilities into the general
education setting. However, the remainder of this document will refer to the education of students with disabilities in the general education classroom as inclusion.

**SOCIAL INTERACTION**

Students with disabilities who are fully included in general education settings are enrolled in the general education classroom for the entire school day, a situation that can provide several advantages. First of all, general education settings provide opportunities for increased social contact and social interaction with typical peers. Social interaction with students without disabilities is important because of the social models that typical peers depict for students with disabilities (Sailor 1989). Full class membership provides occasions to mutually relate and socially interact with typical peers during all aspects of the school day including special classes, lunch, recess, and after school. These interactions may also increase social competence, increase friendships with typical peers, and increase the self-esteem of students with disabilities. An additional advantage is that placement in general education may reduce for some children with disabilities the stigma that can be associated with pullout programs or resource rooms.

Some research has focused on the effectiveness of these programs. Inquiries reveal positive responses from general education staff and demonstrate that non-handicapped students are willing to befriend students with disabilities (Grenot-Scheyer 1994; Helmstetter, Peck et al. 1994; Hendrickson, Shokoohi-Yekta et al. 1996; York, Vandercook et al. 1992). Studies also report that students with disabilities who participate in general education settings have increased social contact with students without disabilities (Fryxell and Kennedy 1995; Hunt, Farron-Davis et
Including students with disabilities in general education classrooms increases contacts with typical students, but the interactions are not always reciprocal. Proximity alone is not enough to motivate meaningful social interaction between students with disabilities and their non-handicapped peers.

In spite of the positive responses to inclusion, it was soon recognized that interventions were needed to effectively encourage reciprocal interactions between students with disabilities and non-handicapped students. Implementation of interventions to increase interactive participation between students with and without moderate to severe handicaps was explored in classrooms (Hunt, Alwell et al. 1996; Hunt, Farron-Davis et al. 1997; Janney and Snell 1996; Salisbury, Gallucci et al. 1995). Studies reported positive social interactions between students with disabilities and their non-handicapped peers in classrooms that employed strategies that encouraged interchange between students.

Methods included cooperative groups, partner systems, class meetings, adjusting class schedules to provide opportunities to interact, modifying the curriculum, and collaboration between general and special education staff to bolster social interaction between students (Helmstetter 1994; Hunt 1997; Janney 1997). These interventions are reported to have increased reciprocal social interactions, increased the communication skills of students with disabilities, and decreased the adult assistance for students with disabilities needed to participate in classroom activities.

These techniques may have increased social interaction among individuals with disabilities; however, the concern for social interactions for students with
disabilities in the inclusive setting was not eliminated. The social integration of students with disabilities in age appropriate general education school settings is a difficult challenge to meet. Haring (1991) suggests that students with disabilities may be fully integrated, but at the same time, be maximally socially isolated. Including students with disabilities in general education classrooms does not insure interaction with typical peers. Despite the positive feedback of more social contacts and increased social integration, students with disabilities are reported as being less popular and more likely rejected than their typical peers (Sale and Carey 1995; Vaughn, Elbaum et al. 1996; Vaughn, Elbaum et al. 1998). Also, students with disabilities were found to be over-represented as isolated (Pearl, 1998). Pearl (1998) investigated the social integration of students with mild disabilities (described in the study as learning disabilities, behavioral disabilities, health disabilities, non-classifiable disabilities, educable mental handicaps, speech disabiltities, and hearing disabilities). The percentage of the 198 students with disabilities who were identified as not being in a peer group was high (20%) compared to the percentage of typical students (1,274) identified as isolated.

Investigations have given some insight into the quality of the social relations and peer affiliations of students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Cook and Semmel 1999; Pearl, Farmer et al. 1998; Williams and Downing 1998). Yet, much more information is needed about the patterns of social interactions between students with and without disabilities and this continues to be an essential area of inquiry if we are to better understand and promote reciprocal relationships.
between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers in general education settings.

**THE GENERAL EDUCATION SETTING**

The general education classroom can provide a setting that invites interactions among students with and without disabilities. Strategies and interventions implemented in the general education room to coach the social skills of students with disabilities are often initiated or provided by the special educator. Special educators frequently recommend tactics that are more focused on the social skills of students with disabilities. Peer tutors, peer buddies, and lunch clubs are a few interventions often suggested to encourage interaction between students with and without disabilities. The general education teacher usually uses more grouping approaches to facilitate social interaction among students.

Collaboration between the special education teacher and the general education teacher may enhance the efforts to promote interaction among students. The special education teacher is not typically in the classroom for most of the day to oversee these interventions unless there is team teaching with both the special education and general education teacher. This implies that the general education teacher must primarily manage interaction between students with and without disabilities for most of the school day. Creating a classroom community that supports interaction among all students may support and encourage student relationships.

Building a classroom community that embraces differences and encourages feelings of belonging will likely foster positive interaction among many of the students in the classroom. In addition to students with disabilities, general education
classrooms may likely consist of students with various abilities, backgrounds, races, and ethnicity. It is likely that classrooms are more diverse than ever before in our country’s history (Grossman 1995). Lickona (1991) suggests that creating classroom community includes: helping students to know each other, teaching students to respect and affirm each other, and helping students develop feelings of membership and responsibility for the group (Lickona 1991). Creating classroom community can benefit each member of the class and develop wider social networks within the classroom for students.

However staff may choose to encourage social connections among students, promoting social interaction among students requires direct and indirect facilitation of social relations between students with and without disabilities, as well as environmental support for the development and maintenance of social relations. These methods and interventions often require monitoring and prompts from the general education teacher, special education teacher, or other staff to encourage social interaction.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study examines the following questions within three classrooms. First, *are social skills promoted in the classroom to encourage interaction between students with and without disabilities?* This qualitative study investigates the organization of the classroom to construct the classroom climate and to encourage interaction among students. The study uses a framework (Fenstermacher 2001) to explore possible techniques implemented by the classroom teacher to build classroom community and promote relationship building among the students. Secondly, *if yes,*
then are these social skills observed during lunch and recess when teacher prompts are not always available? This inquiry seeks to explore playground and lunchroom behavior of students without disabilities and whether they include students with disabilities in lunch conversations and play activities.

Some additional questions invite consideration:

- Are teachers promoting a social climate in their classrooms to include all students?
- Are students with disabilities isolated during unstructured or unmonitored activities that do not involve teacher prompts for social cues?
- Are typical students being prepared to notice or engage students on the periphery?

In-depth information on patterns of social interactions between students with and without disabilities is needed to understand and promote reciprocal relationships between students with disabilities and typical peers in general education classrooms. Research on the social interactions among students with and without disabilities can give insight to the kind of strategies needed to meaningfully include students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study investigates three general education classrooms in three schools. Each classroom includes a student who is mildly to moderately cognitively impaired and eligible for special education services in the school district as Educable Mentally Impaired (EMI). The qualitative study is addressed at two levels: 1) the classroom and 2) recess and lunch. This inquiry seeks to explore teacher practices that build
classroom community and foster student relationship building. Three to four days of initial classroom observation occurred using a framework (Fenstermacher 2001) to determine whether methods are implemented to promote community building within the classroom (See Literature Review).

Data collection also included additional observations, interviews, fieldnotes, and documentation. Six weeks of observations of the students in the three classes took place to examine student interaction during lunch, and during morning, lunch, and afternoon recesses. Observation of playground activity occurred using a framework (Parten 1932) for play behavior (See Literature Review). Parten (1932) identified six categories of play behaviors in preschoolers that range from onlooker with no play activity to engaging in cooperative play. The categories appeared appropriate because the play of students with cognitive delays were observed. In addition, it will not be used to evaluate the play itself, but to determine interaction or non-interaction between students with and without disabilities on the playground. Fieldnotes and memos were carefully constructed during the observations to record events. The three classroom teachers, three students who are EMI, three teacher assistants, three building teacher consultants, and several general education students completed semi-structured interviews for their perspectives of play and lunch activities. In addition, several staff and students provided informal interviews between class, on the playground and during lunch. Documentation included the inclusion policy of the school district and the most recent Individual Education Plans for each student who is EMI. Analysis of the data consist of careful reading and generating categories (Bogdan and Biklen 1992; Bogdan and Biklen 1998; Merriam
1998) to construct meaning from the data. Data from the categories were compared to identify themes and patterns in teacher behaviors for structuring class climate student behaviors in the lunchroom and during recess.

OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

The remaining chapters of this dissertation address the two questions driving this inquiry. Chapter 2 is the review of the literature and provides a review of the empirical research pertaining to the social interactions of students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. It also presents literature on strategies to promote interaction between students with and without disabilities, children’s peer relations and children’s playground behaviors. The research design and methodology for the study is detailed in Chapter 3. Methods of data collection and analysis are described with specifics of the data source, participants, procedures of data collection and analysis.

In Chapter 4, I present descriptive findings from the study derived from the analysis of the data. The findings are presented to address the two questions of the study and describe the classrooms and the students respectively. The first section of Chapter 4 provides a description of each classroom setting and the participants of the study. It also gives further details of instances of community building in the classrooms. The second section of Chapter 4 describes the social activity in the lunchroom, on the playground, and during indoor recess. Finally, Chapter 5 is the summary and conclusion. Chapter 5 also includes practical implications regarding
the value of social skills training and facilitating relationship building among students with and without disabilities.