Inclusion and the process of inclusion is a shift in our culture. It is a sense of belonging, feeling respected and being valued for who you are. In schools, it should be our goal to be an inclusive environment, a place where all students are included and have access to adequate education; including students who have disabilities. For this project, I spent two days observing an inclusive situation. I observed a student with disabilities who is included into general education classrooms. This report is a summary of information I gained through observations, materials and interviews. For two days, I learned about one particular student and his educational experiences. From the experience, I plan to use the information gathered to expand my philosophy of inclusion and reflect on my future teaching strategies.

Student: Mathew  
Special Education Teacher: Mrs. Schultz  
General Education Teacher: Mr. Horton

Mathew is a fourth grade student who attends Eversprings Middle School, a small school in a rural section of central Minnesota. The community surrounding the school is a close-knit collection of Polish and Czechoslovakian families. However, over the past few years, the number of families with Hispanic backgrounds has increased in light of job related opportunities. Students from small nearby towns are bussed to Eversprings, where education is provided for 428 students in grades 3-6. Each grade has four sections of students, with approximately 28-30 students in a classroom. 32 certified and 18 non-certified staff members keep the school a clean, safe and welcome environment. The school recognizes nominated students of the month and students who have shown respect to others and school property. Artwork and projects can be seen displayed in the hallways; however, trophy cases are located at the end of each hallway. No student work is displayed near the cases and they reflect an expectation for students to be the best.
Mathew is a growing boy filled with abundant energy and curiosity. He is polite, smart, aims to please adults he respects, and has strong academic and vocabulary skills. Mathew’s mother describes him as having a strong sense of humor and a curious nature. At home, he is well liked, known as the family clown and loves to play with electronics. He has strong rote memory, math and reading abilities. He also frequently initiates and interacts with his peers. Mathew often follows modeled behavior and asks many questions. Mathew’s academic standard scores are above normal; however, behavioral difficulties and a short attention span often get in the way of his progress in school. He has trouble processing spoken language, which can be helped by offering visual materials and cues. He was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) at an early age and qualifies for services for ASD under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Under his Individualized Education Plan (IEP), Mathew is working toward goals that improve social behavior, personal management, organization, handwriting and gross motor skills. Mathew also receives Developmentally Adapted Physical Education (DAPE), speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and has a Behavioral Support Plan (BSP). According to Mrs. Schultz, the use of the BSP has reduced outlined behaviors to rare occurrences and has allowed Mathew to safely participate in the general education classroom.

Mathew does most of his learning in two classroom settings. His core classroom, where Mathew does most of his work, is the resource special education classroom – managed by Mrs. Schultz. Inside the resource room, students work at personal stations and come together at a large, round table for group work or learning opportunities. Many bright and colorful displays are posted around the entire room. Some offer writing guidance, while others have positive messages for the students to read. One section of the room is covered in carpet and is an area where students can go to relax, enjoy choice activities or take a break to release frustrations.
Mathew’s second classroom is a general education classroom taught by veteran teacher, Mr. Horton. His classroom is small in size, but is filled to the brim with color, student work and activity. Desks seat 28 students and are paired together in rows that face towards the front of the room. If group work is conducted, the desks are easily moved and rotated. Mr. Horton’s teaching methods revolve around direct instruction and cooperative practice. Mathew’s desk is located in the last row, next to the window.

During the current school year (2008-2009), Mathew is included with Mr. Horton’s classroom and with his peers for music, physical education, art, library time, reading, shared/silent reading, lunch, recess, assemblies, reward parties and field trips. When he is in the general education classroom, he has a para educator available. Next year, Mathew will also be included in math and many more subjects. The only time he will be out of the general education classroom is for individualized or small group instruction, social skill development and times when he feels too overwhelmed by the amount of activity in the classroom. Mathew loves to participate in class with his peers and was excited for the school year to begin. He also feels safe knowing that he can go to the resource room if he cannot handle himself on a particular day; “I love all my classes and teachers”.

During my first visit to Eversprings, Mathew was absent and I took the opportunity to talk with his teachers, para educators and learn what I could about him. I was given access to his stations, materials, IEP, BSP and evaluation. While I looked through the material, it became very evident Mathew is very smart and has become well liked. It was explained to me, Mathew had developed a “bad reputation” at his previous program. In the elementary school, he was placed full-time in a special education classroom. This was a highly restrictive environment for Mathew and offered no opportunities for growth or model behavior. The only time other teachers and
peers saw Mathew was when he was having a melt down. During my interview with Mr. Horton, he expressed his initial concerns. He was terrified to have Mathew in his classroom and figured he did not have a choice; he needed to make the best of it. Now, he has gotten to know Mathew on a new level and loves having him in his class. Mathew is polite, always uses his manners and asks questions his peers would never think of. His peers have also become more accepting of him. From day one, it was explained why he “acts the way he does” and what they can do to help. All of the students in the classroom are willing to work with and help Mathew. He has the same academic and behavior expectations as his peers, which are held in high regard. He needs to be reminded more often, but a simple reminder or redirection is all it takes.

When asked about his personal feelings of inclusion, Mr. Horton had a very direct and steadfast answer. “It is great as long as not too much is put on the regular education teacher”. He is comfortable teaching a student with disabilities if the student can be taught in his classroom with minimal accommodation and modifications. “I worry if a student sits in the back of the classroom and you cannot tell if they are learning anything”. Mathew has been a good addition to his class because his academics are at such a high level and he needs a highly structured environment. Mr. Horton feels that Mathew’s biggest struggle is group work. He has trouble working cooperatively, but makes the effort. He is still learning basic social skills – how to get along and take turns – and the other students accept that. Mr. Horton says it helps to have a para in the classroom and he receives a lot of support from a variety of professionals. Overall, it seems as if Mathew is just another student who comes into his class. He is there, but he does not always belong.

During my interview with Mrs. Schultz, I received many of the same answers regarding Mathew, and some new insight. Mrs. Schultz has very high expectations for Mathew regarding
his social skills and involvement in the general education classroom. She wants him to be included full time and improve his peer relations and interactions. As for her personal feelings of inclusion, she feels it should be based on a student’s present level of performance and individual needs. “You have to keep in mind how a student is going to effect the learning of his peers”. If done appropriately and correctly, it benefits all students and educators. Mrs. Schultz’s biggest struggle with Mathew, is he chooses who he listens to. He does not listen to or respect paraeducators or volunteers as much as he does his teachers; “He knows who’s boss”. However, having positive role models, and modeled behavior has made a difference. Mathew has made incredible progress over the last two years in her program and the more he is included, the better it will get.

During my second day visiting Mathew’s school, I had the opportunity to meet him and shadow him during his morning schedule. It never changes and organized with pictures to prepare him for the day and any changes in his routine. It incorporates sensory breaks, desirable activities and rewards throughout the day. Mathew started his day by going over the March calendar to take note of holidays, spring break and days he will have a substitute teacher.

Social skills are taught by Mrs. Pederson – the school’s Emotional Behavioral certified teacher – and lessons are conducted in small group instruction. Mathew worked with two other boys to discuss being sorry. The boys drew a face of a person who is sorry and discussed situations when they would feel sorry, and what they would do. In one situation, they boys asked their parents if they could stay up an hour later and were told no. They expressed feelings of anger and Mathew said he would through a fit. Mrs. Pederson and the group discussed why that was not appropriate behavior and brainstormed alternatives.
During reading in Mr. Horton’s classroom, the students worked on picking out the problem, details and solution of short stories. Mathew sat in his desk and was a very active participant. He needed to be reminded not to shout out a couple of times, and raised his hand to answer questions. When he was having trouble focusing, he reached into his desk and pulled out his “sensory putty”. He was able to keep his hands busy by molding the putty and focus his brain on the teacher. After the group learning was done, the class split into three groups according the color of their vocabulary words for the week. It was Mathew’s group’s turn to read with the teacher. However, half way through, Mathew became highly disruptive and refused to comply with requests. Mathew’s para removed him from the room and brought him to the resource room. He communicated his need to move around and complete the story before he could discuss it. He finished reading the story with Mrs. Schultz while sitting on his bouncy ball. For a choice activity, Mathew chose to put together a puzzle until it was time for music.

Music was a fantastic experience and environment for Mathew. The teacher was very direct, focused and told the students what she expected of them (e.g. listen, do not blurt out, be safe). The class worked on new song verses and dance steps for a future performance. The teacher put the lyrics up on the overhead, demonstrated the song and dance, and helped the students practice. The class was moving around constantly and Mathew truly belonged. Anyone watching would not have guessed he has a disability. Gym was very much the same, but started off a little rough. The previous day, Mathew was absent and was not aware the seating arrangement for groups had changed. He was very confused and upset. The teacher explained the situation, showed him his new spot and refocused him by bringing everyone together to learn about the activity of the day. Each group had to move a large mat around the gym and collect
objects. However, no one was allowed to touch the gym floor. Everyone helped each other and there was a lot of laughing. Mathew belonged and took the leadership role to help his group.

At Eversprings, there were particular things that facilitated Mathew’s inclusion. As his inclusion was based on his present level of performance, Mathew’s team made a good decision to gradually increase his participation in the general education classroom. It has made the experience positive and beneficial to Mathew, his peers and his teachers. In music and gym class, the teachers taught to all modalities and encouraged active participation. All of the students learned at their own pace, worked cooperatively towards a common goal, and received encouragement for their participation. Learning was student-centered and everyone was included the entire time. Mathew has trouble with processing spoken language, but was able to learn the words to the new song by reading the transparency the teacher projected onto the wall. Not only were the words presented, but picture cues also helped students remember the newly learned dance steps, which were demonstrated repeatedly by the teacher. In Mr. Horton’s room, Mathew is allowed sensory breaks to move around and use props to refocus his attention. The group work conducted in the classroom also enabled him to practice his social skills and learn cooperative group work.

Although some of the teaching strategies facilitated inclusion, many aspects posed as barriers. Out of all the professionals I spoke with, no one used person first language. This was not the only mental barrier present. Not all of the professionals at Everspring believe in the full inclusion of all students. In the case of Mr. Horton, it is okay if not too much work is put on the general education teacher. On one side, Mathew has been a positive influence in the classroom. On the other, most of the instruction was teacher centered and included one-size-fits-all curriculum guide. The students had the chance to develop their own methods of learning the
vocabulary words of the week (e.g. draw pictures, quiz friends, make flashcards), but they also did an equal amount of learning through worksheets. If the general education teachers planned on teaching diverse students of all abilities, not much extra work would be necessary to include students who have disabilities. It would also improve the inclusion process if co-teaching was embraced within the school and para educators assisted all students rather than hover over the student they are assigned too.

In one incidence noted above, Mathew was unable to follow the direction in the group activity and needed to be removed. The problem could have been resolved if Mathew was allowed to use his bouncy ball in Mr. Horton’s class, if he was allowed to read the story prior to the group work or if Mrs. Schultz helped to run group activities. If Mathew had been allowed to read the story prior to class, he would have been prepared and more receptive to group discussion of each page. If Mrs. Schultz participated in station learning, she could have helped Mathew participate as a member of the group. In gym class, frustrations could have been avoided if Mathew had been notified ahead of time of the changed seating arrangement. Effective and consistent communication is a must between all teachers. One other problem I took note of was the interaction between the special programs. The emotional behavioral certified, learning disability, developmental disability and resource room teachers all work parallel to each other. They often work with the same teachers and children, but have little communication other than the basics. Each of the special professionals has his or her individual room and support staff. If the entire special education support staff worked together, everyone in the school would benefit.

Another relationship missing is between the school and the community. Not a lot of interaction takes place between the two. The school and the students would benefit greatly from community workers or volunteers working within the classrooms – parents or business
representatives. The students within the classroom should also be more involved in their learning and assessment experiences. It would bake learning more personal and increase student belonging.

Over all, Everysprings Middle School has taken the first steps to become an inclusive school; however, they have a long way to go. Teachers must lower mental barriers and be willing to embrace all students. After that is accomplished, teachers can receive help from the entire support staff to plan curriculum, which teaches students of all abilities. Teachers can teach multi-tiered lesson, teach to all modalities, be aware of multiple intelligences, conduct cooperative group learning, and many other strategies. Students who have disabilities are not the only ones to benefit form such instruction. Teachers will become more confident in their teaching and will be able to teach all students with diverse abilities. It will enhance the knowledge and educational experiences of all students. I am learning many new and useful concepts. I hope to improve the education of the students I work with in the future by helping implement these strategies, and many more. I must show teachers inclusion is possible and beneficial to everyone.