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Teachers and Teacher Assistants: Exploring the Meanings of Their Working Relationship

By

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September 19, 2003
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Dedication

Although my educational journey will never be complete, I want to acknowledge the many people who have traveled on this part of my journey with me. Their words, advice and thoughts are reflected throughout this dissertation.

I extend a special thank you to the two schools and in particular the two dyads of teachers and teacher assistants who participated in this study. They welcomed me into their classrooms and shared with me the special working relationship each has with one another. Without them, this study would not have been possible.

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Abstract

In Alberta, educating students with special needs in inclusive settings is the first placement option to be considered by school boards in consultation with parents and students (Alberta Learning, 2002). Alberta Learning (2002) suggests that in order to provide these programs, teachers in regular classrooms work with qualified staff who are knowledgeable and skilled. These support staff include teacher assistants. Teacher assistants implement strategies, as directed by a teacher, to realize the student's educational goals, as outlined in the Individual Program Plan.

The purpose of this multiple case study research was to explore the meanings that teachers and teacher assistants have of their working relationship in inclusive classrooms. Data were collected from two dyads of teachers and teacher assistants through semi-structured interviews, conversations and classroom observations. Two case studies were written that provided a descriptive and interpretive account of the working relationship between teacher and teacher assistant. The participants' transcribed interviews were analyzed and meaning units were identified and paraphrased, themes were abstracted and clustered. Themes included role function, teamwork, time constraints, openness, acceptance, flexibility, communication, trust and reciprocity. These themes were discussed in relation to the literature.

The two case studies reflected the working relationship of the two dyads of teachers and teacher assistants. The participants in the case studies indicated that the relationships between them are complex and must be understood within the context of their classroom. Each of the participants observed that teacher assistants are necessary in classrooms where teachers are working with students with special needs. Variables

such as the needs of the students, time constraints and class size strongly influenced the working relationship of the teachers and teacher assistants.

It was my intention, in conducting this study, to add to our understanding of schools, in regard to teachers' and teacher assistants' working relationships. For the most part, research about the working relationship between teacher assistants and teachers in regular classrooms has been absent from the literature. This study provided a starting point for understanding these vital partnerships.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO
THE STUDY

Through relationships with other people such as professionals, parents, citizens, children and adults, we come to an awareness and understanding of who we are. Through experiencing our relationships we create our values and beliefs, our wishes and goals, and our worldview.
(Thompson, 1991, p.1)

Teaching was once considered a profession in which teachers worked in relative isolation in their classrooms, but in many Alberta classrooms today there are a variety of adults working with children in various roles. One only has to walk into a classroom to see not only the classroom teacher, but also teacher assistants, parent volunteers and in some cases, other professionals working together to meet the needs of students. One of the main reasons for the increase in the number of teacher assistants practicing in regular classrooms is the integration of students with special needs.

In Alberta, numerous policies and documents have been developed to address the education of students with special needs. With the adoption of Alberta Education's policy, *Educational Placement of Students with Special Needs* (Policy 1.6.1) which specifies that "educating students with special needs in regular classrooms in neighborhood or local schools shall be the first placement option considered by school boards, in consultation with students, parents/guardians, and school staff" (Alberta Education, 1997) there has been an increase in collaboration and teamwork among a variety of agencies and personnel in school settings. The past decade has seen an increase in the number of support staff working with teachers in

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inclusive education classrooms in order to support students with special needs. Some support staff who work in schools are highly qualified professionals providing specialized services to students. Examples of these include speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists and physical therapists and in some cases, teacher assistants. At the present time, Alberta Learning has no provincial standards of practice or ethical guidelines for the work of teacher assistants. In Alberta, teacher assistants are not required to be certified, licensed or formally trained. There are, however, one-year certificate programs offered by institutions such as Grant MacEwan College, Red Deer College and University of Calgary that provide formal training for teacher assistants in the province. Many school districts in the province employ some teacher assistants who have undertaken this training; however, the majority of teacher assistants working in Alberta schools have no formal training.

My role as a school principal has led me to understand the importance of the work of teacher assistants and especially of the relationship of teachers and teacher assistants as they work together in inclusive settings. In many school districts, collaboration between teachers and teacher assistants has become a system goal. As a result, there is an overriding need for an understanding of how teachers and teacher assistants work together so that they can be more effectively supported by the education community. The research reported here explores the meanings teachers and teacher assistants construct about their working relationship. In the related literature, there are a variety of terms used to refer to teacher assistants including educational assistants, teacher aides, educational paraprofessionals and paraeducators. The Alberta Teachers' Association (2000) refers to teacher assistants as "school personnel

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who help teachers carry out the educational mission of the school and who make the educational experience of children more rewarding" (p. 2).

In Alberta, teacher assistants, under the supervision of certified teachers, work in classrooms to provide adapted instructional and related services to students with special needs. In examining and attempting to understand the work that teachers and teacher assistants undertake in inclusive classrooms, it is important to examine the role definition of each position in relation to current policy and legislation. Teacher assistants are non-certified staff members who are employed to carry out the educational program for a student under the direction of a teacher. Under Section 117 of The Alberta School Act (2002), school boards are permitted to hire non-teaching staff to assist teachers in performing their duties. The Alberta School Act (2002) refers to a teacher as an "an individual who holds a certificate of qualification as a teacher issued under this Act" (Section 1(1) (ii)). The role of the teacher and the role of the teacher assistant have different responsibilities associated with them.

Purpose of the Study

My interest in seeking to understand the meanings that teachers and teacher assistants have of their working relationship is grounded in my practice as a teacher and a school principal. As a teacher of students with special needs, I came to understand the importance and complexity of relationships that teachers have with teacher assistants. As a school principal, I am reminded frequently of the unique and often complex relationships that develop between teachers and teacher assistants working on my staff. I believe that relationships between teachers and teacher assistants make a difference to the learning environment created for students and to

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the entire context of the classroom. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore the meanings two dyads of teachers and teacher assistants have of their working relationship as they work together in inclusive classrooms.

Research Question

Ellis (1998) observes that "beginnings are always important and in interpretive inquiry projects one begins with an entry question" (p. 18). Ellis elaborates further by maintaining that "the research question posed has to be a real one rather than an abstract debate or a position on an issue one wishes to promote. One must acknowledge that one does not know the answer" (p. 18).

The research question which guided this interpretive study is *"What are the meanings held by teachers and teacher assistants of their working relationship?"* As a researcher and a school principal, guided by my knowledge of interpretive inquiry, I continue to be interested in understanding these relationships. "In interpretive inquiry, we begin with an openness to behold or contemplate life in its wholeness and complexity" (Ellis, 1998, p. 19).

Research Approach

In order to conduct this research project, a multiple case study approach was adopted (Merriam, 2001) with the belief that the meanings teachers and teacher assistants have of their working relationship are instrumental to understanding their roles. Stake (1995) maintains that instrumental case study is research "on a case to gain understanding of something else" (p. 4). This means that the case itself is of secondary interest. Stake (1995) observes that the instrumental case study facilitates an understanding of something else and provides insight into an issue (p. 4).

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My intent in this research study was to interview, dialogue with and observe two teachers and two teacher assistants working together in two different schools that have inclusive classrooms. The aim was to construct an understanding of what it means to work together to provide instruction and service to students with special needs. Interview data and field notes were transcribed, analyzed and are presented in a narrative form for each case.

Personal Biographical Reflections

It seems appropriate to share my professional background in regard to this study because it relates to the study, as well as to my reflections regarding interpretive-constructivist approaches to research. Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p. 26) observe that "all research is interpretive and suggest that our beliefs and assumptions about the world form our way of looking at the world, which strongly influences our research approach." By focussing on the nature of the work of teachers and teacher assistants as it is experienced within selected cases, my aim through this inquiry was to understand and reconstruct the constructions of the phenomenon held by both the "researcher and the researched." Smith (1993) emphasizes the importance of clarifying one's fore-structure before beginning an interpretive inquiry. He states that "what one brings to the interpretation of the expressions of others shapes not only one's understanding of the intentions and motivations that stand behind these expressions, but also one's understanding of the intentions and motivations that stand behind one's own expressions" (p. 183). Given this, I feel it is important to acknowledge my views and assumptions related to teaching, learning and working with teacher assistants and then relate these assumptions to my beliefs about research.

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The term *constructivist or constructivism* routinely appears in books about qualitative research and in books and articles related to teaching and learning. Many of the beliefs associated with constructivism are not new. Constructivism is a philosophical position in which knowledge is viewed as a human construction (Gredler, 2001). Within the theoretical paradigm of constructivism there are many views. Schwandt (1994) observes that "all share the idea that our understandings of the world come from the point of view of those who live in it" (p. 118). Fosnot (1996) in her book *Constructivism: Theory, Perspective and Practice* observes that "as a psychological construct, constructivism stems from the field of cognitive science, particularly the later work of Jean Piaget, the sociohistorical work of Lev Vygotsky and the work of Jerome Bruner" (pp. 10-11). The educational philosopher, John Dewey, was constructivist in his thinking, often emphasizing the necessary relationship between experience and education. A large portion of the curriculum in the Alberta *Program of Studies* (Alberta Learning, 2001) is premised on constructivist beliefs about teaching and learning.

In thinking about and studying constructivism, I have come to realize the term means different things to different people. Constructivism is a way of viewing the world. It addresses our ontological and epistemological views. Constructivist theory asserts that humans do not find or discover knowledge as much as they construct or make it. As an educator and researcher, I align myself with a social constructivist stance from the Vygotskian tradition in that I believe that "reality is constructed by individuals interacting in their social world" (Merriam, 2001, p. 34). As a result, multiple perspectives of reality exist. I believe we use our background knowledge and

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through interaction with others, we construct meaning. McKay (1993) maintains that "constructivism is a theory about the nature of mind. ...Constructivist theory focuses on the individual as an active constructor of meaning rather than a passive recipient of knowledge" (p. 16). McKay elaborates further by maintaining that "learning is viewed as a complex process involving the interaction of past experience, personal intentions and new experience. Social context is recognized as a crucial element in the meaning making process" (p. 16).

In my practice as a teacher and administrator, I have found that teachers, teacher assistants and principals share understandings of their practice through their interaction with each other and with their students. I also believe that the social context and culture of a school influence these understandings.

My desire and interest in undertaking this interpretive inquiry has grown out of a seventeen year career as an elementary school teacher, a teacher of students with special needs, an adult educator, a school administrator and a doctoral student in Elementary Education at the University of Alberta. As I reflect on my experience as a teacher and principal, who has worked extensively with teacher assistants, I am reminded how difficult it is to address the learning needs of all students within an inclusive classroom. Working with teacher assistants affects the learning process in a variety of ways. At times through my career I have had the opportunity to work with teacher assistants who enhanced our classroom program, and at times I have worked with teacher assistants who added to my workload for a variety of reasons.

More recently, as a school principal, I experienced working with teacher assistants in a different manner. Often I am the person who hires teacher assistants

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for students and programs in my school, and although they work with specific teachers, it is my responsibility to ensure that students' needs are being met. As a principal, I have also found that if there are difficulties between the teacher and the teacher assistant, they will quite often look to me for advice and in some cases, resolution, to the difficulty. Some of my specific beliefs and views about teacher assistants center on the notion that teacher assistants are a necessary and valuable support in classrooms where there are students with special needs. I believe, however, that educators don't always have a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of teacher assistants in classrooms, and that teachers often do not know how to work with a teacher assistant. I also believe that there are teacher assistants who, for a variety of reasons, do not have a clear understanding of the role of a teacher assistant and the context in which they work. There is a need for inquiries such as the one reported here, if educators are to understand the relationship teachers and teacher assistants have in inclusive classrooms.

My understanding of the work that teachers and teacher assistants do together has been shaped and reshaped by my experience as a special needs teacher who worked closely with teacher assistants, as an elementary school principal and now as a researcher. As a researcher undertaking qualitative research, it is important for me to examine the biographical dimension of the process because, as Denzin and Lincoln (1994) write that "qualitative researchers self-consciously draw upon their own experiences as a resource in their inquiries. They always think reflectively, historically and biographically" (p. 163).

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Thinking about my beliefs about learning and teaching and about my educational practice as a teacher and as an administrator has influenced my role as a researcher. Wenger (1998) suggests that, as researchers, "the concepts we use to make sense of the world direct both our perception and our actions" because we tend to "pay attention to what we expect to see; we hear what we can place in our understanding and we act according to our world views" (p. 8). Many researchers use the terms *making meaning, constructing or making sense* interchangeably. For me, making sense answers the question "How can I understand what I have heard from my participants?" For me, meaning evolves. I believe that constructing meaning through interviews, dialogue and observation is a prime component of interpretive inquiry. A constructivist stance affects how researchers discipline themselves to produce credible and useful interpretations. Increasingly, personally and jointly constructed knowledge is seen not only as credible data but also as the product of good research.

During the process of this research study, it was advantageous for me to be connected to the work the participants do and to many of the experiences they have had. I have an immediate understanding of most of the topics the participants discussed. During the interviews I found that I was often tempted to participate in the conversations because there was so much to share. Although a collaborative exploration of ideas and search for meanings took place, I attempted to ensure that I provided an opportunity for the participants to talk. I found that there were direct connections for me in many areas and that there were a number of areas that provided

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another dimension and new learning. At times, the words of the participants would "ring true" and would echo in my ears.

Need and Significance of the Study

This study comes at a time of increased scrutiny of schools, educational programs, teacher professional development time, use of school resources and spending of special education dollars. This study is important in that it examines the working relationship of teachers and teacher assistants. These working relationships are becoming increasingly common in schools today. Very little research has been conducted in the area of understanding the meanings of teacher and teacher assistant work. The research that has been done is related primarily to descriptions of the role of teacher assistants and the types of activities in which they engage as they work with students.

I believe that this inquiry has the potential to inform teacher and teacher assistant understanding and practice. Although this inquiry is limited to two dyads of teachers and teacher assistants who are working in inclusive settings, I believe many aspects of the study will resonate with teachers and teacher assistants who are currently working in the field, and with pre-service teachers and teacher assistants who are entering the field. Other stakeholders who can potentially benefit from the outcomes of this study include school principals, who are charged with selecting teachers and teacher assistants for their schools, school districts, that are attempting to draft policy that relates to teachers and teacher assistants, and post secondary institutions that offer education programs.

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Pilot Study

From January to April 2002, I conducted a pilot study as part of my preparation for undertaking this research study. The purpose of the pilot study was to ascertain the suitability of the research question, test the interview instruments and other data collection strategies; and test the data analysis procedures. A pilot study is useful for testing many aspects of proposed research. Glesne (1998) maintains that researchers enter a pilot study with a different frame of mind from the one they have going into the actual research study. The idea is not to get data *per se*, but to learn more about the research process, interview questions, observation techniques and the role of the researcher.

The pilot study involved interviewing two teachers and two teacher assistants who worked together in an inclusive setting. This study allowed me to gain experience in observing and interviewing participants. Stake (1995) explains the importance of trying out questions to ensure that they get at the heart of the matter, and to help the researcher learn to focus on what the interviewee is really saying. Yin (1994) reminds the researcher that pilot studies are useful for either detecting inadequacies or helping to articulate the case study design. In conducting this pilot study, I learned a great deal about interviewing and the research process. Problems with the wording of questions or the meaning of questions were soon discovered. The participants of the pilot study provided feedback relating to my body language, tone of voice and even about the physical arrangement of the interview. This was useful information for me when designing the actual research study. My data analysis skills were also enhanced through the pilot study. These skills included the actual formatting of the page when

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transcribing data and the process of looking for key words or themes that emerged from the data. The pilot study also contributed to my understanding of research protocol. As an ethics review was necessary in order to undertake the pilot study, it provided me with an opportunity to work through the ethics review process. A description of the pilot study can be found in Appendix I.

Key Definitions

The following definitions from Alberta Learning (2002) *Standards for Special Education* served as a guide for this interpretive inquiry.

Teacher Assistant

A person who works under the direction of the teacher to assist in the implementation of the student's Individual Program Plan.

Appropriate Program

Educational programs and services that are designed around the assessed needs of the student and are provided by qualified professionals who are   knowledgeable and skilled.

Placement

The setting in which the special education program or service is delivered to the student.

Dyad

A teacher and a teacher assistant who are working together in an inclusive classroom.

Students with special needs, as defined within *In the Balance – Meeting Special Needs Within Public Education* (Alberta School Boards Association, 1997), refers to:

(i)   students being in need of special education because of their behavioral,

         communicational, intellectual, learning or physical characteristics; or

(ii)   students who may require specialized health care services; or

(iii)   students who are gifted and talented. (p.11)

For the purposes of this research study, the phrases, "students with special needs" and

"students with exceptionalities" are used interchangeably.

Organization of the Dissertation

This study focused upon exploring the meanings teachers and teacher

assistants construct regarding their working relationship. The key question that

guided the study was *"What are the meanings held by teachers and teacher assistants

of their working relationship?"*

The dissertation is divided into eight chapters. In the preceding chapter, the

context, purpose, research question and the rationale for the significance of the study

was presented as well as the biographical reflections of the researcher. Chapter Two

presents an overview of the combined literature in the following areas: Relationships,

Teaching Students with Special Needs, Teacher Assistants in Alberta and the role of

collaboration and teamwork in working relationships. Chapter Three details the

design of the research. It examines case study, selection of the cases, data collection

and data analysis. Chapter Four and Five presents the case study of Nancy and Jessi

who work together at Plumtree School. Chapter Six and Seven presents the case study

of Candice and Sarah who work at Bailor Elementary School. Chapter Eight contains

a discussion of the meanings of a working relationship as it relates to the research

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literature. This chapter also contains a final reflection on the research that examines the implications of the study.

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CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the literature that informs and serves as a basis for the case studies that are the substance of this inquiry. Patton (1990) maintains that in a qualitative study, the literature review may take place at various points in the study, including the analysis and interpretation of the data. Since this study is about relationships, I focus first upon this area in the literature. In this section entitled: *The Nature of Relationships*, I focus on literature that explores relationships in general and the importance of relationships within organizations such as schools and business. I could find no literature, however, that describes the relationships of teachers and teacher assistants that work together in inclusive classrooms. This void suggests that this study may add to the body of knowledge in that area.

I also reviewed the literature that has informed my understanding of inclusive education, collaboration and teamwork as they relate to working together in schools as well as the history and work of teacher assistants in Alberta. In a section entitled *Teaching Students with Special Needs*, I focused on literature that examines the history and issues associated with teaching students with special needs in Alberta. A third area of literature explores *The History and Context of Teacher Assistants in Alberta*. The final section of the literature review examines the concepts of *Teamwork and Collaboration*. This area of research provides possibilities to consider when teachers and teacher assistants are working together in inclusive classrooms.

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I return to the literature in chapter eight in a discussion of how the literature informs the meanings or understandings the participants have of their working relationship.

The Nature of Relationships

People create their lives within a web of connections to others yet there is an elusive understanding of the nature of relationships that exist in schools. Sattler and Shabatay (1997) offer a description of a 'relationship' with the following:

> We are able to think, imagine, and feel how the other is thinking, imaging, and feeling. We do this neither by projecting our own feeling onto the other nor by remaining detached but by being open to that which is taking place in the person before us. This we can do to some extent before we know a person well. But a full 'making present' occurs in closer relationships where we are able to experience what the other is experiencing. (p. 31)

Josselson (1996) claims that relationships with others depict "the cast of characters in a life and the nuances of interconnections provide the richness, the intricacy, the abrasion and much of the interest in living (p. 185). Josselson (1996) observes that "until recently, the majority of psychological theory of development has occupied itself with explication of the self. Self-esteem, self-control, self-awareness, and individual achievement have dominated the literature (p. 31). Lasch (1984), author of *The Minimal Self*, has written about relationships and the strong self. Lasch claims that a strong self is built through strong, healthy relationships. He observes that a self stripped of its relationships is a beleaguered self concerned only with its own survival. Buechner (1991), a spiritual writer, questions whether we can even be

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human without relationships. Buechner observes that, "You can survive on your own, you can grow on your own, you can prevail on your own, but you cannot be human on your own" (p. 46).

Josselson (1996) maintains that the nature of relationships in organizations has remained shrouded partly because there are so few words and agreed upon concepts to indicate the ways in which people connect themselves to others.

Building relationships involves time and hard work. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996) say of relationships in organizations:

> The system emerges as individuals freely work out conditions of life with their neighbors. No one worries about designing the system. Everyone concentrates on making sense of the relationships and needs that are vital to their existence. They are co-evolving. (p. 14)

In examining relationships and their role in schools, it is important that we examine the business community where current management theory focuses on relationships – relationships between individuals and among teams; relationships to other companies in their business environment, or economic web; and ultimately the relationship to the natural environment. Lewin and Regine (2001) observe that the business community has adopted new ways of thinking about organizations and management in order to improve quality, productivity and profits. Motivated not by humanistic descriptions of "teams helping others" but by the demands of the marketplace, businesses in the 1970s began to reorganize, establishing clear mission statements and goals, and creating smaller units of employees who were given radical amounts of responsibility and power to solve problems and make decisions

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around the issues of quality, consumer satisfaction and productivity. In *Relationships: The New Bottom Line in Business*, Lewin and Regine (2001) talk about complexity science in relation to relationships in organizations:

> This new science, we found in our work, leads to a new theory of business that places people and relationships – how people interact with each other, the kinds of relationships they form – into dramatic relief. In a linear world, things may exist independently of each other, and when they interact, they do so in simple, predictable ways. In a non-linear, dynamic world, everything exists only in relationship to everything else, and the interactions among agents in the system lead to complex, unpredictable outcomes. In this world, interactions or relationships among its agents are the organizing principle. (p. 18)

Lewin and Regine (2001, p. 18) claim that relationships are not just a product of networking and the like but "genuine relationships based on authenticity and care." They observe that caring relationships are a necessary component of a healthy and productive work place but they maintain that:

> We're so busy moving people around, trying to meet our deadlines, trying to influence people to believe in what we're doing, that we just don't want to really look into anybody's eyes and see they have souls. We should start with the premise that we have souls. But some souls are difficult to manage. (p. 11)

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Lewin and Regine (2001) go on to observe that it is time to alter our perspective: "to pay as much attention to how we treat people – co-workers, subordinates, customers – as we now typically pay attention to structures, strategies, and statistics" (p. 27).

Fullan (2001) observes in his book, *Leading in a Culture of Change* that people must begin to "talk about businesses as if they had souls and hearts, and about schools as if they had minds (p. 51). Fullen (2001) observes that "schools, particularly because we live in the knowledge society, need to strengthen their intellectual quality as they deepen their moral purpose" (p. 52). He elaborates on this point by observing that:

> The 'soul at work' is both individual and collective: Actually most people want to be part of their organizations; they want to know the organization's purpose; they want to make a difference. When the individual soul is connected to the organizations, people become connected to something deeper – the desire to contribute to a larger purpose, to feel they are part of a greater whole, a web of connection. (p. 52)

Teaching Students with Special Needs

The trend towards including all students with special needs in their neighborhood school represents a philosophical change that is part of the educational reform movement that has been evident since the 1960s in North America (Asante, 1997; Winzer 1993). Institutions, special classes and special schools remained prevalent in the education of students with special needs into the 1960s. In that decade, parents, advocates, legislators and educational systems began to reject the notion that students with special needs should be educated separately from their

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peers. While reform efforts in special education began in earnest in the 1960s, it is

the 1980s and 1990s that can be seen as the decades of major school reforms in North

America. In 1989, a group of Canadian researchers wrote that inclusion or inclusive

education represents the belief or philosophy that students with special needs should

be integrated into regular classrooms, regardless of whether they can meet traditional

curricular standards (O'Brien, Snow, Forest & Hasbury, 1989). The current

movement to educate all children with special needs in regular classrooms is

variously termed inclusion, inclusive schooling, and inclusive education. Inclusion,

sometimes called attendance at neighborhood schools, is the current policy of the

departments of education of all ten provinces and territories in Canada.

Although each province sets its own policies regarding educating students

with special needs, there is considerable consistency in the movement toward

inclusion. In Alberta, numerous policies and documents have been developed to

address the education of students with special needs. Alberta Learning, in its

document, *Standards for Special Education (2002)*, states that:

> In Alberta, educating students with special needs in inclusive settings is the
>
> first placement option to be considered by school boards in consultation with
>
> parents and, when appropriate, students. Inclusion by definition refers not
>
> merely to setting but to specially designed instruction and support for students
>
> with special needs in regular classrooms and neighborhood schools. (p. 1)

Similarly, The Alberta Teachers' Association (1990), policy 17.A.5 states:

> The Alberta Teachers' Association believes that integration of students with
>
> special needs should be in the most enabling environment; environments less

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inclusive than the regular classroom may be more appropriate for some students with complex or severe learning and/or behavioral needs.

Currently in Alberta, educational programs and services for students with special needs are designed around the assessed need of the student and are provided by qualified staff who are knowledgeable and skilled (Alberta Learning, 2002). This qualified staff includes teacher assistants who will "as directed by the teacher, implement strategies, to realize the student's goals, as outlined in the IPP (Alberta Learning, 2002, p. 7). These policies do not indicate the amount of inclusion that is required for students with special needs. Inclusion can be viewed as ranging from partial to full inclusion. Full inclusion means that the education of all students with special needs in the schools and classrooms they would attend if not disabled, via collaboration by special and general educators to bring support and services to the student (Rogers, 1993). Those promoting full inclusion insist that the regular classroom is appropriate for every child, regardless of degree and type of disability. Proponents of partial inclusion, on the other hand, claim that:

Individuals with disabilities should be served whenever possible in regular classrooms in inclusive neighborhood schools and community settings. Such settings should be strengthened and supported by an infusion of specially trained personnel and other appropriate supportive practices according to the individual needs of the child. (Council for Exceptional Children, 1993)

As the integration of students with special needs into regular classrooms continues to increase, an examination and understanding of how classroom teachers engage in

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working relationships with support personnel such as teacher assistants is necessary in order to provide successfully for the needs of students.

Historical Context of Teacher Assistants in Alberta

In Alberta, teacher assistants are an integral part of educating students with special needs. The Alberta Teachers' Association (2000) refers to teacher assistants as "personnel who help teachers carry out the educational mission of the school and who make the educational experiences of children more rewarding" (p. x).

As early as 1967, the value of having teacher assistants supporting classroom learning was recognized by the Alberta Teachers' Association. At their yearly conference, the Annual Representative Assembly (ARA) resolved in policy 58E/67 "that the Executive Council, in cooperation with other interested bodies, develop criteria governing the employment of instructional personnel who do not require teaching certificates" (Alberta Teachers' Association Policy Statements, 1967, p. 1). They further resolved in policy 62L/66 that the Alberta Teachers Association express its approval in principle of the institution of a new group of non-professionals to be known as 'teacher assistants' and that the Alberta Teachers' Association, in cooperation with the Department of Education "establish regulations to govern the qualifications, status and employment of such teacher assistants" (p. 2). Although this resolution was accepted, there are still no provincial guidelines related to the employment of teacher assistants in Alberta.

In 1973 a study of teacher assistants was conducted for Alberta Education by Chamchuk. This study was designed to identify the issues related to teacher assistants in an attempt to put forth a proposal for policy development related to

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employment. The study recommended "allocating decisions of personnel employment to the school boards while providing for appropriate and necessary involvement of school principals in the matters of the quality and nature of services being offered by the school." The study also recommended that

> the Minister of Education assume some responsibility in monitoring and regulating the work of these teacher assistants through the establishment of a registry of both the nature of duties allocated to instructional aides and the names of specific persons utilized for such duties. (p. ii and iii)

Increased Need for Teacher Assistants

In North America, over the past 20 years, educational practices, most particularly in the area of the delivery of special education and related services have changed dramatically. The number of support personnel delivering services to children with special needs has increased significantly. Pickett (1994) observed that this increased reliance on paraeducators and other support staff is attributable to several factors, among them the changing role of teachers, the continuing shortage of teachers in the United States, and the integration of students with special needs into regular classrooms.

In Alberta, the adoption of Alberta Education's Policy 1.6.1 in relation to the *Educational Placement of Students with Special Needs* in 1996 has been one reason for the increase of teacher assistants working in regular classrooms. Another reason we have seen an increase in the number of teacher assistants working in regular classrooms is due to an initiative adopted by Alberta Learning in 1998. Additional funding to employ teacher assistants, not tied specifically to special needs education,

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was made available in Alberta Education's *Three-Year Business Plan (1998-2001)*. This document committed the government to an increase in the "number of teacher aides for grades 1 to 6 to increase classroom support and to enhance opportunities for students to achieve learning expectations" (p. 11). This program, originally called the Teacher Assistant Initiative and now called The Teacher Assistant Program has provided funds over the past five years to school districts. The manner in which the Teacher Assistant Program funding is deployed and the amount of time the teacher assistants are assigned to classrooms varies from school district to school district. Currently, most elementary schools have at least some access to the services of a teacher assistant under this program.

Roles and Responsibilities – Teachers and Teacher Assistants

With the integration of students with special needs into regular classrooms, the position of teacher assistants is one of the fastest growing positions in public education (Doyle, 2002). The roles of both the teacher assistant and the teacher in inclusive classrooms can be challenging and rewarding, however the complexity of the context of the classroom makes role clarification critical when teachers and teacher assistants work together. Pepper and Briskin (2000) observe that a role is an expression of who we are in relation to ourselves, to others and to our work. They indicate that through our role we "express our personality, our sense of purpose and our commitment to the position" (p. 31).

The primary responsibility for the educational program that students receive in schools falls upon teachers who are expected to maintain a high standard of conduct, care and instruction. The roles and responsibilities of teachers are dealt with under

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Section 18 of The School Act (With Amendments 2002) and *The Teaching Profession Act* (R.S.A. 2000), which sets out a mechanism for disciplining teachers who engage in unprofessional conduct. The roles and responsibilities of a teacher include the following:

A teacher while providing instruction or supervision must

(a)   provide instruction competently to students;

(b)   teach the courses of study and education programs that are prescribed, approved or authorized pursuant to this Act;

(c)   promote goals and standards applicable to the provision of education adopted or approved pursuant to this Act;

(d)   encourage and foster learning in students;

(e)   regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students, the students' parents and the board;

(f)   maintain, under the direction of the principal, order and discipline among the students while they are in the school or on the school grounds and while they are attending or participating in activities sponsored or approved by the board; subject to any applicable collective agreement and the teacher's contract of employment, carry out those duties that are assigned to the teacher by the principal or the board.

Section 117 of the *School Act* (With Amendments 2002) authorizes school boards to employ non-teaching employees, including teachers' assistants, to help teachers realize the educational mission of the school. Neither the *School Act* nor any

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other legislation specifies the accountability, responsibilities and duties of such non-teaching employees. The Alberta Teachers' Association (2000) outlines the roles and responsibilities of teacher assistants as "under the direction of a teacher, support staff may work directly with students to deliver activities that reinforce and advance the education program" (p .4). The Alberta Teachers' Association (2000) Code of Professional Conduct prohibits teachers from delegating teaching duties to teacher assistants. The Code does specify that teachers may delegate "specific and limited aspects of instructional activity" to teacher assistants (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2000, p. 16). Doyle (2002) refers to the services that are provided by teacher assistants as "indirect services" rather than a direct educational service. By definition, indirect services are those "services that are delivered to the student by another individual under the direct supervision of a qualified professional" (Doyle, 2002, p. 6).

In a British Columbia study (Lamont & Hill, 1991), teachers, administrators and the teacher assistants themselves were asked what activities were appropriate for teacher assistants to perform. There was general consensus that the tasks should be non-instructional and supportive in nature. Deemed to be inappropriate were tasks such as functioning as a substitute teacher and administering and scoring formal assessments. In the study conducted by Lamont and Hill, teachers saw the role of the teacher assistant as one of support, not instruction. Teacher assistants are not to replace the educational decision-making or to make plans; they are to assist the teacher in enacting plans. Lamont and Hill (1991) also observe that teacher assistants are not to teach but to tutor and reinforce previously taught material. Activities such

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as modification of educational materials, one to one reinforcement of concepts, behavioral management support, administration of informal assessments and involvement in the Individual Program Plan preparation are activities that teacher assistants are often asked to perform.

There is no definitive list of duties that teacher assistants who work in Alberta schools are expected to carry out. The Alberta Teachers' Association (2000) maintain that the responsibilities of teacher assistants are determined by:

- Individual's qualifications;

- Needs of the student;

- Requirements of the teacher;

- Resources within the school and the school division.

Over the years, the Alberta Teachers' Association has adopted a number of policies on the role of teacher assistants (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2000; p. 12). These policies specify, among other matters, that

- A teacher should be assigned an assistant only if the teacher so requests,

- Assistants are responsible to the teacher(s) to whom they are assigned,

- The supervising teacher is responsible for determining the assistants' specific duties and

- The tasks that a teacher assigns to an assistant should not include duties for which the teacher is professionally responsible.

The Alberta Teachers' Association (2000) indicates that the duties of non-teachers can include:

- Observing student behavior and providing information to teachers;

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- Within the scope of their own professional qualifications, offer options and possible courses of action for the teacher to follow;

- Provide advice on the resources available

- Clarify elements of the lesson for students who are having trouble, supervise reinforcement exercises;

- Report to teachers on observed student behaviors and outcomes;

- Advise teachers about the degree to which the program structure promotes or inhibits the best use of the teachers; assistant skills.

In general, teachers are responsible for assigning duties to teacher assistants, supervising them, and for ensuring that they implement students' programs effectively. While every teacher assistant position has its unique characteristics, most teacher assistants assume a range of responsibilities that include making curricular modifications, managing student behavior and classroom support functions. Teacher assistants do not evaluate students, plan instruction nor are they responsible for evaluating student performance (Alberta Teachers Association, 2000, p. 4).

Working Together in Schools – Collaboration and Teamwork

The current philosophy of integrating students with special needs in regular classrooms in Alberta has prompted the following questions: What support will be provided to students with special needs in classrooms, who will provide that support and how will that support be provided? Alberta Learning (2002), in the document *Standards for Special Education* states that "educational programs and services are designed around the assessed needs of the student and are provided by qualified staff who are knowledgeable and skilled" (p. 6). Teacher assistants are quickly becoming

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an integral part of educating students with special needs. In many classrooms teachers are working with teacher assistants to implement programs for students who have been assessed as having special needs. The challenge is for teachers and teacher assistants to know how to work together for the benefit of students with special needs.

When attempting to understand the working relationship of teachers and teacher assistants, it is important to examine the research literature related to teamwork and collaboration. Collaboration is emphasized frequently in the literature associated with schools and teamwork is regarded as an efficient, productive way of achieving goals. Friend and Cook (2000) maintain when collaboration and teamwork are put together in a school context, educators have "a powerfully synergistic climate in which to educate students" (p. 13). Until recent years, working relationships by adults in a school setting were more occasional and happenstance than frequent and planned. Friend and Cook (2000) observe that:

> General education teachers who used to work primarily alone now often work
> in grade level or interdisciplinary teaching teams with other classroom
> teachers, special education teachers, teacher assistants, reading specialists,
> speech and language therapists and others. Although schools certainly are
> faced with many challenges as we begin the twenty-first century, none is as
> pervasive or as complex as the increasing expectation that professionals work
> directly with one another to educate their students. (p. 2)

With the integration of students with special needs in regular classrooms, collaboration and teamwork have become an integral part of most schools' practice. The Canadian Oxford Dictionary (1998) defines collaborate as "to work jointly."

Several definitions of collaboration in an educational context have been discussed in the literature associated with special needs education and effective schools. Citing the effective school literature, Olsen (1986) describes collaboration as "interactive processes based on joint problem-solving and a set of commonly held beliefs, norms and practices" (p. 12). Scott and Smith (1987) add to the concept of collaboration by defining the characteristics that are often associated with a collaborative school. Within the context of a collaborative school, collaboration means engaging in "help-related" activities that promote effective teaching. Scott and Smith (1987) maintain that each person within a collaborative school fulfils a carefully defined role; comprehensive planning is required; leadership, resources, risk and control are shared and the working relationship extends over a relatively long period of time. Inherent in all of these definitions are the elements of mutuality and reciprocity. West and Idol (1990) define mutuality as shared ownership of a common issue or problem and reciprocity is defined as allowing collaborators to have equal access to information and the opportunity to participate in problem identification, discussion and decision making. When we examine the framework in which teachers and teacher assistants work, there is an element of mutuality but reciprocity is not part of the relationship. Friend and Cook (1996) refer to collaboration as "a style for direct interaction between at least two coequal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work towards a common goal" (p. 7). This definition speaks to the necessity of parity between the individuals. Unlike other teachers or consultants who may work in inclusive classrooms, teacher assistants do not have parity in the school setting. Teachers supervise and direct teacher assistants. Teacher and teacher assistants work

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together on implementing programs in classrooms, however, it is the teacher who is responsible for supervising the teacher assistant's work (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2000, p. 3). A teacher assistant follows the teacher's direction. Based on this lack of parity between teachers and teacher assistants, for the purposes of this study, the term teamwork is being utilized to help understand the working relationship that exists between teachers and teacher assistants.

Teamwork in Schools

There are many opportunities for people to work together in schools. Since teachers and teacher assistants do not share parity in their roles, we can look at the literature about teamwork when examining the work that teachers and teacher assistants do together. Larson and LaFasto (1989) refer to a team as "consisting of two or more persons, having a specific performance outcome or goal and requiring a coordination of activity among the team members to attain the outcome of goal" (p. 6). Friend and Cook (1996) offer this definition of teamwork: "A relatively small set of interdependent individuals who work and interact directly in a co-ordinated manner to achieve a common goal" (p. 31). The definition of teams can be further clarified by examining the characteristics inherently associated with them. Friend and Cook (2000) maintain that the essential characteristics are awareness of team membership, regulation of interactions by shared norms and interdependence of team members (p. 31).

Awareness of Team Membership

Individuals cannot be part of a team unless they perceive themselves to be. Although teachers and teacher assistants are working together as teams in classrooms,

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research has shown that a group of people do not work together successfully or achieve a working relationship just because the group is called "a team" (Garner, 1988). Extending this view, team members must also be perceived by others as forming a team (Feldman, 1985). In schools where teachers are working with teacher assistants in inclusive classroom, both the teacher and the teacher assistant must perceive themselves to be working as a team.

Regulation of Interactions by Shared Norms

A team is an organized system of individuals whose behavior is regulated by a common set of norms or values (Sherif and Sherif, 1956). In schools, teams of teachers and teacher assistants who work together must have spoken or unspoken, yet clear expectations for each member. Both the teacher and teacher assistant must be aware of and accept the rationale behind working together to meet the needs of students with special needs. This facilitates effective team functioning.

Interdependence of Team Members

Westby and Ford (1993) claim that members of teams are highly interdependent because their organizational roles are functionally interrelated. An event that affects one member of the team is likely to affect the other members of the team. For example, if a teacher was ill and was absent from school for a period of a week, the teacher assistant may not be able to work with the substitute teacher in the same manner as they would with the regular teacher.

A common thread across definitions of teams is that teamwork can be defined as a process among individuals who share mutual goals and work together to share the goals. Teamwork enables people to discuss their work together and, as a result, to

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grow professionally. Input from all members of the team needs to be solicited. Teamwork requires much effort, reflection and skill. It requires effort and commitment and a willingness to accept the challenges of working together.

Team effectiveness can be achieved by sharing expectations with one another, by encouraging all members of the team to participate in the process of working together, by appreciating each other's unique personality traits, by respecting diversity, and by demonstrating a positive attitude towards teamwork. According to a review of research on team effectiveness done by Abelson and Woodman (1983), a team that is just beginning the process of working together usually has some or all of the following characteristics:

- There is some confusion as to the role definition of each team member.

- There is often confusion as to the social and professional relationships among members of the team.

- Individuals may be unaware of how their skills or knowledge relate to the goals of the team.

- While there may be some awareness of short-term goals (e.g. working with students), understanding of long-range goals may be more elusive.

These characteristics are important to consider when focussing on teacher-teacher assistant teams. Gerlach (2002) maintains that if a teacher-teacher assistant team is to be effective, both members must have a clear understanding of and agreement on the goals for the students they are working with. The roles and responsibilities of both teacher and the teacher assistant in achieving these goals must be clearly defined. Several factors need to be considered in determining these roles and responsibilities.

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They include the experience and training of both the teacher and the teacher assistant, comfort level, time constraints and knowledge level of both the teacher and the teacher assistant. Together, the teacher and the teacher assistant determine what needs to be done, by whom, and by when, clearly defining roles, responsibilities and expectations.

Gerlach (2002) maintains that there are a number of specific characteristics that are often associated with teacher and teacher assistant teams. Positiveness is extremely important to a team relationship. We generally prefer to associate with positive people. The research about teamwork indicates that most people who engage in successful teamwork experience a "consistently hopeful outlook" regarding the relationship. Trust between team members is necessary to a productive working environment and trust is built within the team by promoting open communication, support and acceptance. Josselson (1996) speaks of the need for team members to engage in "mutuality." Mutuality is emotionally being with another, joining in. Josselson (1996) provides this definition: "like two instruments whose notes form a chord, we together create something greater than our own experience. We share, we cooperate, and we play. We find ourselves in another and another in ourselves." Josselson (1996) refers to mutuality as a form of communion with another person (p. 19). Either we see what another is doing (physically, emotionally, or metaphorically) and try to orient our own experience, or we allow another to join us in what we are doing. Colenso (2000) also observes that characteristics associated with effective educational teams include:

- Pride in work and school;

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- Respect for the needs of students and colleagues;

- Close attention to detail; getting things right, believing things can always be improved upon;

- A cooperative and amenable approach, able to take and offer constructive feedback and advice;

- Openness, honesty and integrity; the confidence and willingness to surface and confront problems;

- Actively support colleagues both within the classroom and within the school.

Benefits of Teamwork

Educating students with special needs in regular classrooms is a huge undertaking for teachers. It requires not only a great deal of expertise but it also requires the assistance of a number of support personnel. There are a number of benefits associated with working as a team within schools. Garner (1995) maintains that the benefits of teamwork can include:

- The behavior and actions of individual team members are shaped by a combination of fundamental knowledge and personal values of each team member;

- Teamwork can unite the highly specialized services of different personnel;

- Teamwork reduces the possible duplication of services by a number of people working with a student;

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- Teamwork provides consistent attention to areas of student need throughout the school day;

- Teamwork can provide application of the skills and knowledge specific to the educational difficulties off the student;

- Teamwork can promote caring and committed relationships among staff. There is often mutual support for coping with failure, anxiety, and needs;

- Teamwork often enhances one's feelings of belonging; and

- Personal power is nurtured when team members acknowledge individual contributions and incorporate them into daily practice.

Challenges Facing Teams

There are a number of factors that can influence the effectiveness and success of teamwork in schools. The failure of teams in schools does not necessarily occur as a result of a lack of competence, lack of ethics or personal inadequacies of team members. Teamwork takes time. Many schools do not have timetabling options that enable teachers and teacher assistants to have time to discuss and plan for student activities. Although teamwork can take many forms, having time to talk together or plan together is an important element in working together. Larson and LaFasto (1989) maintain that the most frequent cause of team failure is when team members allow other issues to become more important than the team goal. They indicate that some of these issues include:

- Control Issues – these occur when members of the team concern themselves more with questions of who's in charge than with finding the best possible solution to the problem;

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- Political Issues – these occur when members of the team worry more about how others might respond or feel about the action taken rather than whether the action is effective in achieving the goal and

- Individual Issues – these occur when team members are more concerned with protecting themselves or obtaining personal advantages than with the success of the collective endeavor.

Summary

Each section of this literature review will be considered when reconstructing the meanings teachers and teacher assistants have of their working relationship. These re-constructions may lead to an exploration of further literature in these areas or new possibilities.

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CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

A research question sets the parameters for the type of research that will be undertaken. The research question guiding this study is: *"What are the meanings held by teachers and teacher assistants of their working relationship?"* This study was conducted as an interpretive case study that is descriptive and heuristic. Descriptive research enables us to more clearly understand processes, situations and people. In this study, a comprehensive and accurate description of the working relationship between two teachers and their teacher assistants was undertaken. The design of the study allows, through interpretation, insight into the meanings teachers and teacher assistants have of their working relationship. The working relationships of each teacher and teacher assistant dyad is described in chapters four and six respectively.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the characteristics of the conceptual framework of interpretive inquiry and in particular, case study. As a researcher, I am influenced by constructivism and therefore a discussion regarding the constructivist paradigm in relation to the research methodology is also undertaken.

Constructivist Paradigm

Guba and Lincoln (1994) outline the key elements of four interpretive paradigms: positivism, post-positivism, the constructivist-interpretive, critical (emancipatory) and the feminist poststructural. Merriam (2001) also outlines three similar orientations to research: positivist, interpretive and critical research. After examining each of these paradigms in relation to ontology, epistemology and

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methodology and based on my biographical reflections and the nature of the research question, I have situated this study within the constructivist-interpretive paradigm. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) observe that research that is undertaken within this paradigm

> Assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and subject create understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures. (p. 4)

Guba and Lincoln (1994), in their discussion of constructivisim observe that

> Realities are apprehended in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions; are socially and experimentally based; and are dependent for their form and content on the individual persons holding the constructions. (p. 110)

Guba and Lincoln also assume that the observer cannot and should not be disentangled from the observed in the activity of inquiring into constructions. Schwandt (1998) maintains that "the findings or outcomes of an inquiry are themselves a literal creation or construction of the inquiry process. Constructions in turn are resident in the minds of individuals" (p. 243). Merriam's (2001) outline of interpretive research closely parallels that outlined for constructivism by Guba and Lincoln. Merriam observes that "in interpretive research, multiple realities are constructed by the individuals involved (p. 4).

Merriam (2001) maintains that the goal of research conducted within the interpretive paradigm is to develop understanding, provide description and outline meaning. The design of this research study was flexible and evolving with data

collection consisting of interviews, conversations and observations. The resulting case studies are comprehensive and holistic in nature.

Interpretive Inquiry

This study was descriptive and interpretive in nature. Descriptive research enables us to understand processes, situations and people more clearly. Packer and Addison (1989), in their discussion of interpretive inquiry, observe that an interpretive inquiry starts with a question, a caring or a practical concern. My study was based on a desire to understand the working relationship between two dyads of teachers and teacher assistants. My pre-understanding of working relationships was based on what I believed working relationships between teachers and teacher assistants should or could be. This understanding was also influenced by my years of experience as a teacher and a school administrator. The research question guiding this study was "What are the meanings held by teachers and teacher assistants of their working relationship?" Ellis (1998) explains that:

> In the forward arc of the hermeneutic circle…one uses 'forestructure' to make some initial sense of the research participant, text or data. That is, one uses one's existing preconceptions, pre-understandings or prejudices – including purposes, interests and values – to interpret; this initial approach is unavoidable. (p. 26)

The return arc of the hermeneutic circle entails the evaluation of the original interpretation. This involves going back to see what I did not see with more deliberative questions and analyses about the working relationship between teachers and teacher assistants. Within this study, going through the backward arc involved a

continual re-examination of the transcripts, conversations and observation field notes. As Ellis (1999) maintains, researchers must continually remind themselves that "one does not know the answer" (p. 18). To this end, I reviewed the data on a continual basis.

Understanding Case Study

In choosing a research approach, the researcher must determine which approach will be most appropriate for answering the research question. The question asked in this research study can be answered most effectively through conducting a collective or multiple case study. Because of the complex interaction between the teacher and the teacher assistant and the uniqueness of the classroom and students, case study was appropriate for this research study. Case study, with its emphasis on meanings and understanding, seemed to be appropriate for gaining understandings into the meanings teachers and teacher assistants construct about their working relationship. Case study is commonly used in education.

The case study method of exploration reflects a microcosm or small piece of the larger environment. In a research context, a case study involves a researcher who interprets a single subject or phenomenon and communicates the findings for others to be able to understand and experience (Stake, 1994). Bogdan and Biklen (1992) have described a case study as a "detailed examination of one setting" (p. 58). Merriam (1998) has described case study research as the intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, institution, person, process or social unit. Its purpose is to enable the researcher to acquire an in-depth understanding of the situation under study and its meaning for the participants.

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In a case study, rich description is important. As Stake (1995) explains "To develop vicarious experiences for the readers, to give them a sense of 'being there,' the physical situation should be well described" (p. 63). Merriam (2001) explains that in case study, the intent should be to understand the phenomenon of interest from the participant's perspective, not the researcher's. Merriam observes that "this is referred to as the *emic*, or insider's perspective versus the *etic*, or outsider's view" (p. 7).

Case study research focuses on process rather than outcomes, on context rather than variables, and on discovery rather than confirmation. The value of case study research lies in its ability to increase understanding of the experiences of the participants. Stake (1995) observes that "insights into how things get to be the way they are can be expected to result from case studies."

In case study research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection. The quality of the case study research depends on the depth and breadth of the data collected and how well the researcher can interpret and represent the participants' meanings and experiences.

In this study, the case is multiple in that I collected data in one classroom in each of two elementary schools. Researchers have used a number of terms when approaching more than one case in a study. These are commonly referred to as collective case studies, cross-case, multicase or multisite studies or comparative case studies (Merriam, 2001). Stake (1994) defines collective case study in the following way:

Ultimately we may be more interested in a phenomenon or a population of cases than in the individual case. We may simultaneously carry on more than

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one case study, but each case study is a concentrated inquiry into a single

case...We might call this *collective case study*. It is not the study of a

collective but instrumental study extended to several cases. (p. 237)

Types of Case Studies

Case studies in education can be further defined by arranging them into

categories or types based on disciplinary orientations or by function (Merriam, 2001,

p. 34). The categories include: Descriptive, Interpretive or Evaluative. A descriptive

case study in education is one that presents a detailed account of the phenomena

under study. Interpretive case studies also contain rich description, however, an

interpretive case study is used to develop conceptual categories or to illustrate,

support or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to the data collection.

Evaluative case studies involve description, explanation and judgement.

Yin (1993) also has identified some specific types of case studies:

Exploratory, Explanatory and Descriptive. Exploratory cases are sometimes

considered as a prelude to social research. Explanatory case studies may be used for

doing causal investigations while descriptive cases require a descriptive theory to be

developed before starting the study.

Stake (2000) identified three types of case study: Intrinsic, Instrumental and

Collective. In an intrinsic case study the case itself is interesting. This type of case

study provides a better understanding of the case. An example of an intrinsic case

study may be a case study involving an examination of new curriculum. In an

instrumental case study, the case is of secondary interest. This type of case study

provides an understanding of something else and provides insight into an issue or

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theory. An example might be a study of a particular city in order to understand the culture of that city. In collective case studies, the case is of even less interest. The collective case study is an instrumental study extended to several cases. It may be possible, by examining a number of cases, for the researcher to apply this understanding to an even larger collection of cases. For example, a study of several classes of students who are having reading difficulties may lead to a better understanding of reading difficulties.

Data Collection

The goal of a case study is to describe as accurately as possible the fullest, most complete description of the case. Method and analysis occur simultaneously in case study research. Specifically, data collection and analysis occur as an iterative process, wherein the researcher moves between the literature and data and back to the literature again. Data collection can go on indefinitely if one is not careful. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe four guidelines to consider when collecting data: "the exhaustion of resources, …the saturation of categories, an emergence of regularities, and an over-extension, a perception that new information is not related to the focal point of the study" (p. 350). In this study, the collection of data occurred over a period of five months, at times mutually agreeable to the participants and me. Data were collected primarily through taped interviews, ongoing conversations with each teacher and teacher assistant throughout the study and observations in each inclusive classroom setting. Extensive field notes were taken and a reflective journal was kept by the researcher. A comfortable relationship was established with each of the four participants.

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Standards of Rigor

Data collection and representation in the constructivist paradigm is concerned mainly with trustworthiness, credibility, transferability and confirmability. In constructivism:

> The investigator and the object of the investigation are assumed to be interactively linked so that the "findings" are *literally created* as the investigation proceeds...The variable and personal...nature of social constructions can be elicited and refined only through interaction *between* and *among* investigator and respondents. These varying constructions are interpreted using conventional hermeneutical techniques and are compared and contrasted through a dialectical interchange. (Guba &Lincoln, 1994, pp. 110-111)

Ellis (1998) deals with the fear that "we will somehow miss finding 'objective reality' by observing that a uniquely correct interpretation is not possible since perception is interpretation and each person perceives from a different vantage point and history" (p. 8).

Trustworthiness

The criteria for establishing trustworthiness of research conducted within a constructivist-interpretive paradigm are different than those applied to research undertaken in other paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). A number of researchers (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Lather, 1986; Owens, 1982) have described ways of addressing the trustworthiness of a qualitative inquiry. Guba and Lincoln speak of credibility rather than internal validity and suggest that "naturalists can ask those

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people whether their realities have been represented appropriately' (p. 246). This was a critical part of this research study. Each participant received copies of her transcripts. At each successive interview we discussed what had been said previously and further meanings and possibilities were explored. I then shared the concepts and themes that were emerging from the data. The participants indicated agreement with these summaries or in some cases, clarified or expressed their understandings. As the dissertation was being written, draft copies were provided to the participants for review in terms of accuracy of what was reported and in terms of what they were comfortable with. Member checks were used to ensure the quality of the information obtained through interviews and observations. The member check, "whereby data, analytic categories, interpretations and conclusions are tested with members of those stakeholder groups from whom the data were originally collected, is the most crucial techniques for establishing credibility" (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, p. 314). I discussed the transcripts with the participants and explored meanings and interpretations with them in an open, sharing and collaborative manner.

Qualitative case studies are limited by the sensitivity, integrity and biases of the researcher. With these points in mind, I conducted this study in a school district that is fairly unfamiliar to me. Since the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection, I was also aware that the data would be influenced by my own theoretical position and professional background. Deciding what to observe or include in the case study is usually left to the researcher to decide. This can provide opportunities for researchers to exclude data that might be contradictory to their beliefs. To this

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end, data were shared with my supervisor and the participants to ensure that this did not occur.

Credibility

Qualitative researchers use a variety of data sources in order to enhance the credibility of the qualitative study. Prolonged engagement in the field, a research journal and member checks are ways to ensure credibility (Guba, 1981; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). I was involved in the data collection phase of this research study for a period of five months. The data in this research study consisted of interview transcripts and conversations that reflected the individual accounts of personal experiences of working together. I depended on the personal integrity of each participant to relate their understanding of what it means to work together in an inclusive classroom. All interviews were transcribed and returned to each participant on an on-going basis. By providing transcripts of the interviews and summaries of my interpretations to each participant, credibility was established and maintained throughout the study.

Transferability

The issue of transferability in qualitative research has been examined by a number of researchers. Stake (1981) maintains that findings from the case study are different from the knowledge gained from other research approaches because they are more concrete and resonant with the experience of the reader of the study, they are more contextual, they are more developed by reader interpretation and because they are based more on reference populations determined by the reader. The findings of this study may resonate with other teachers and teacher assistants who are working

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together. I have provided detailed descriptions of the context of each case study as well as "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) collected during the interviews and conversations in order to provide the reader with as rich a base as possible to understand and apply the specifics of his or her particular situation.

Dependability

An audit trail was established and maintained through the use of field notes and a reflective journal. In addition, tape transcriptions and summaries were maintained throughout the research study. My ongoing reflections and interpretations are documented in the reflective journal. As well, successive drafts of each case study were written and rewritten as colleagues who are familiar with my interest and work provided comments and feedback regarding the study.

Each participant was asked to verify and validate the interpretations to make certain that a shared understanding of the working relationship was maintained. Summaries and transcripts of each interview were provided prior to the next interview being held. As well, each participant was provided with a draft copy of the dissertation.

Confirmability

Guba (1981) maintains that naturalistic researchers can ensure the confirmability of their work by practicing reflexivity. A reflective journal and an audit trail assisted with the recording of the data and in validating what I observed and heard were true to the events that were described by the participants. Throughout the study, I checked with the participants on an on-going basis to ensure I recorded an accurate interpretation of their working relationship with each other.

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Sites of Inquiry

The constructivist position tells us that the socially situated researcher creates, through interaction, the realities that constitute the places where empirical materials are collected and analyzed. In such sites, the interpretive practices of qualitative researchers are implemented. These practices are methods and techniques for producing empirical materials as well as those theoretical interpretations of the world. (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 353)

Denzin and Lincoln (1998) have suggested that the most unique aspect of case study is the selection of the case to be studied. Patton (1990) described the procedures that case study researchers use to select their cases as "purposeful sampling." The goal of purposeful sampling is to select cases that are rich in information with respect to the researcher's purpose.

In order to conduct the inquiry reported in this dissertation, I approached two different elementary schools where teachers and teacher assistants work together in inclusive settings. Both of these schools, which are located in a school district outside a large urban area, have a strong special needs population base. Permission was obtained from the Superintendent of Schools to approach the principals of two schools. The principals were asked to identify potential teachers and teacher assistants who were willing to participate in the research study. Each principal identified a teacher and a teacher assistant who expressed an interest in participating in the research study. These participants were informed of the purpose of the study and the ethical guidelines established by the University of Alberta. Signed consent was obtained from each teacher and teacher assistant.

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Plumtree School

The first school, which I have called Plumtree in this study, is located in a small town just outside a large urban area. This is a kindergarten to grade three school with approximately 250 students. In addition, it is designated as a special needs site by the school district. There are 24 teachers and approximately 17 support staff. Within this support staff contingent there are approximately 14 teacher assistants.

When I phoned the principal requesting permission to conduct my research in Plumtree School, he told me about the school and at that time indicated that he felt he might have a teacher and a teacher assistant who might be interested in participating in the study. He indicated that although he had many teachers and teacher assistants working together, Nancy and Jessi have a working relationship that was unique and successful. I sent a copy of the research proposal and the ethics review to Plumtree and soon received a call from Nancy, a teacher who indicated that she and Jessi, the teacher assistant with whom she worked, would be interested in discussing the study with me. Arrangements were made to meet at the school to discuss the proposed study.

Bailor Elementary School

The second site, called Bailor Elementary School is a kindergarten to grade six school located in a rural area. The school is located near a First Nation reserve and near to a summer vacation area. Approximately 110 students attend the school. The educational program is delivered by 6 teaching staff and 4 teacher assistants.

I knew the principal of Bailor Elementary School through my classes at the University of Alberta. Hearing him speak about his school had piqued my interest in

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attempting to conduct my research there. I phoned him to inquire about whether any of his staff might be interested in participating in the study. He encouraged me to send my proposal and the ethics review out to the school so that his staff could respond. I received a call from Sarah, a teacher assistant, shortly thereafter indicating that she would be interested in the study and that Candice, the teacher who worked with her had shown an interest. We agreed to meet later that month to discuss the possibilities.

Interviews and Conversations

Interviewing was a major source of data collection for this study. I chose semi-structured interviews, informal conversation and observation as methods to gather research data. Collecting qualitative data through interviews, conversations and observations, is about "asking, watching, and reviewing (Wolcott, 1992). Interviewing is a method of collecting "descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 96). I wanted to understand how the teachers and teacher assistants experienced or understood their working relationship.

Kvale (1996) observes that qualitative interviewing is based in conversation. Rubin and Rubin (1995) build on this by noting that in qualitative interviews the emphasis is on the researcher asking questions and respondents answering. For the purpose of this study, it was my intent as researcher to derive interpretations, not absolute truths from the interview data. Weber (1986) describes interviewing as "an invitation to conversation" in which the interviewer and the participant jointly reflect on a phenomenon to create a joint understanding through discourse. Rossman and

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Rallis (1998) describe interviews as "true conversations in which the researcher and participant together develop a more complex understanding of the topic. They observe that "there is authentic give-and-take in these interviews - a mutual sharing of perspectives and understandings" (p. 125).

Canning (1992, p. 61) speaks to the value of interviewing within interpretive inquiry by suggesting that "if we are to actually improve schools and educational practice, we will need to explore the interpretations those in the enterprise hold of themselves...by asking those who experience some phenomenon of interest to tell about it in their own words."

Feldman (1999) suggests that conversation has many implications in interpretive inquiry. First, it can lead to new knowledge and understanding of teaching. Second, it encourages a sense of belonging so participants are encouraged to stay committed to the research inquiry. It can be an effective way to bring thoughts and ideas to light, facilitate communication, exchange information, and reach consensus and share understanding. "Conversations among teachers can serve as a research methodology in which the sharing of knowledge and the growth of understanding occurs through meaning making processes" (Feldman, 1999, p. 125).

When conducting interviews and participating in conversations, researchers must be good communicators. According to Merriam (1998, p. 23), " a good communicator empathizes with respondents, establishes a rapport, asks good questions, and listens intently...Hearing what is not explicitly stated but only implied, as well as noting the silences, whether in interviews, observations or documents, is an important component of being a good listener." Throughout the interviews, I tried to

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avoid interrupting or making comments about what the participants were say or how they were feeling. I focused on listening to what the participants were saying and attempting to understand their perspectives. Seidman (1991, p. 3) suggests that qualitative interviewing is based on an "interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience

A semi-structured interview with each teacher and teacher assistant occurred at the beginning of the research study. An individual interview was held with each participant around the halfway point and the end of the five month data collection period a final interview was held with the teacher and teacher assistant. Semi-structured interviews encouraged the teachers and teacher assistants to "define their world in unique ways" (Merriam, 1988, p. 73). An interview guide was used in the initial interview, during which time the participants were asked to discuss their working relationship (See Appendix III). The final interview included questions about ideas that had emerged throughout the data-collection period specific to each pair's working relationship, as well as common questions regarding the work of teachers and teacher assistants in inclusive classrooms. As well, during the course of the data collection there were numerous opportunities for ongoing conversations with each of the participants.

During the interviews I listened carefully, letting the participants do most of the talking. Stake (1995) maintains that "the purpose for the most part is not to get a simple yes and no answer but description of an episode, a linkage, an explanation" (p. 65). I used questions to get the participants to elaborate when I didn't understand what they were telling me or if I needed clarification. Each interview lasted

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approximately 45 minutes. Each interview was tape-recorded and then transcribed by the researcher. Prior to the next visit to the school, I reviewed the transcripts and identified ideas that I did not fully understand and wanted to pursue. On subsequent interviews, participants were given the previous interview's transcript. They were encouraged to read over their transcript and make points of clarification.

The first interview was conducted with the teacher and teacher assistant together. It allowed me, as the researcher, to provide a structure or framework for the research study in that the nature and purpose of the research could be openly discussed while at the same time building rapport with the participants. During this initial exchange I had the opportunity to share my personal background and interest in examining the working relationships of teacher and teacher assistants. This was conducted in a manner designed to encourage them to be honest and not strive to please. In addition, issues such as confidentiality, informed consent, and the participants' right to withdraw were discussed.

The second interview, conducted with the teacher and the teacher assistant on an individual basis, involved gathering data regarding the participant's meaning of their working relationship. All interviews took place at the schools. An open-ended, semi-structured interview format was used to avoid both directing the participant's thoughts and asking questions, which supported my personal biases. The interview guide provided topic areas within which the researcher was free to explore and probe in a conversational manner.

The research question posed to each participant was, "Tell me about your working relationship with each other within your classroom." Participants freely

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conversed with the researcher seeking clarification when needed. Additionally, participants were prompted when they no longer appeared to have anything to say or were asked to describe areas of interaction highlighted in the research.

The final interview conducted with the teacher and teacher assistant together allowed for me to follow up on information that had been shared previously. It also allowed me the opportunity to discuss some of my observations and to check for meaning. During this interview, I also asked each of the participants to comment on what they feel the future looks like in terms of working with students with special needs in inclusive classrooms.

Classroom Observations

"Observations work the researcher toward greater understanding of the case" (Stake, 1995, p. 60). Throughout the study, data collected through classroom observations provided material for ongoing conversations with each teacher and teacher assistant. Numerous classroom observations of each teacher and teacher assistant dyad were made during a five month period. As a researcher, I took on the role of passive observer. Spradley (1990) describes this role of a researcher as one who is "present at the scene but does not participate or interact to any great extent" (p. 59). I conducted observations during times when there was a significant amount of interaction occurring between the teacher and the teacher assistant. I specifically noted indicators of role functions, communication patterns and interaction patterns between the teacher and the teacher assistant. As an observer, I made an effort to avoid the appearance of being an evaluator. In conducting the pilot study for this

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research, I learned that teachers and teacher assistants can be particularly sensitive to feeling that their practice was being evaluated.

Fieldnotes

Field notes, referred to within chapters four to seven, were compiled both during and immediately after each classroom observation. It was difficult for me to learn how to observe and what to observe while in the classroom. As Stake (1995) reminds us, "We can only look at a few aspects" (p. 60). As I spent more time in the field, I became selective in what I observed and recorded. As Merriam (1998, p. 97) observes, I shifted "from a wide angle' to a 'narrow angle' lens." My observation notes included descriptions of the teacher and the teacher assistants' actions, verbatim comments, paraphrased talk, teaching and learning activities and resources, descriptions of processes and the context of each classroom. Although students were not the focus of data collection, their involvement in the activities of the classroom formed an important part of the context of the classroom and of the relationship between the teacher and the teacher assistant.

I coded all data for reference. For example, the first teacher interview that I conducted at Plumtree School on November 17, 2002 was referred to as T 1 A1. Subsequent interviews with the same teacher were referred as T1 A2 and so forth. Similarly, field notes are referred to according to teacher and teacher assistant and the date. For example, a classroom observation of a teacher's and teacher assistant's interaction, conducted on November 23, 2002, is referred to as FN T/TA November 23, 2002.

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Reflective Journal

Throughout the data collection period and during data analysis and writing, I kept a personal reflective journal. The purpose of this journal was to allow me to keep an on-going record of my thoughts, feelings, questions and impressions during the course of the research. By recording these personal reflections, I was able to record and act upon tacit knowledge while conducting analysis and writing and was better able to determine the extent to which my personal biases were impacting the interpretation of the data.

Data Analysis

Gall, Borg and Gall (1996) suggest that data analysis is a systematic process of organizing and arranging the information to better understand the data, and then informing others of the findings. The analysis involves working with the data collected, organizing, searching for patterns, discovering what is relevant and deciding what to tell others (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Data analysis in case study research, claims Stake (1995), is "a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations" (p. 71).

Data collection, analysis and interpretation were ongoing throughout the research process, with the field notes and interview transcripts read and reread on many occasions. When conducting a case study, the researcher gathers comprehensive, systematic and in-depth information about the case. Although there is no single way in which to conduct data analysis, Bogdan and Biklen (1992) maintain that there are two stages of data analysis; the first stage of analysis occurs as data are collected and the second stage takes place after the collection has been completed (p.

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154). Data analysis for this study occurred in stages with the first stage being informed and influenced by my understanding of interpretive inquiry as an unfolding spiral (Ellis, 1998). Each attempt to get closer to an understanding of the research question (with each unit of inquiry) is a loop in the spiral. What I learned in each loop provided direction and prompted reframing for the next loop in the spiral of the study. Merriam (1998) contends that the researcher who fails to recognize the importance of the first stage of analysis "runs the risk of ending up with data that are unfocussed, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed (p. 124). In order to avoid this happening in this study, the specific procedures utilized in the first stage of data analysis included the following steps:

- The tape-recorded interviews were first listened to and read through simultaneously to get a feel for the language and the meanings each participant had of their working relationship. Particular attention was paid to the participants' rate of speech, tone of voice and those experiences that received repeated emphasis. Additional questions that were designed to clarify or add to my understanding of the working relationship emerged from this first interview. This enabled me to probe for understanding of the research question during the next interview. The field notes were reviewed on a continual basis to look for patterns or emerging themes as well as to ensure that clarification of certain points could occur.

- Each participant was given a copy of their interview transcript prior to the next interview. I encouraged them to read their transcript carefully and make points of clarification if they wished. Many of their comments reflected the questions that I

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had prepared for the second interview. During this interview, they were asked to comment on the transcript and then we moved on to the emerging questions.

The next stage of analysis was to construct, compose and write the two case study reports. I had collected a great deal of data and I found myself re-reading the transcripts and field notes over many times. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) note how important it is for researchers to write down their thoughts throughout the data collection period. They suggest that it is important that the researcher record important insights before they are lost. I recall writing in my reflective journal at this point:

> I have read the transcripts over so many times that I am now able to remember the words without seeing them on the page. How do I begin to understand these relationships? How do I try to capture the thoughts, feelings and experiences of each teacher and teacher assistant and still have it make sense to the reader? What is the data telling me? (February 3, 2003)

In order to write each case study, I began with a careful re-reading of all the transcripts as well as a thorough examination of the observation notes, the field notes and the reflective journal. During the process of reading and rereading data, I began to think about the themes that were emerging and how some of these were reflected in the literature. Once all the information was compiled, I undertook the following in-depth analysis: Phrases or sentences were extracted from each transcript, the observation notes and the field notes that were revealing of an aspect of the participants' working relationship with the other. Redundant phrases and those statements, which did not speak to the research question, were eliminated. Significant

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statements were re-read, this time for the purpose of ascertaining the meanings behind the words. In some cases, it was necessary to go back to the teacher or teacher assistant for clarification. Two levels of interpretation were then applied to each statement. First, statements were paraphrased and clustered into themes and secondly, these themes were clustered to see if any overlap or commonalties appeared across the cases. Comparisons between the two cases were not undertaken in any systematic fashion, however, if there were instances of similarities between the two cases, these were noted. These commonalties are examined in chapter eight.

Passages from the interview transcripts were highlighted in order that they could be used to demonstrate a particular theme when writing the case study. I needed a starting point for writing the case study reports so I looked at the transcripts and notes to where each participant had started to talk about the beginning of the relationship and the context of the relationship. This struck me as a good place to begin each case study report. I continued to group the data that spoke to this beginning stage of the relationship. I moved on to write the sections which described the relationship. I described the processes, the relationships, the setting and situations and the participants in the study.

After I completed the first draft of each case study, I spent a considerable amount of time reading and thinking about each case. I gave each participant a copy of case study report in order that they could provide feedback and make corrections if necessary. After receiving this feedback, I continued to reflect on the data. I began to write in my journal questions that came to mind as I read the case studies. I asked myself: *What are these relationships about? What is important about each one? Are*

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there any new themes emerging? I then began to examine each theme in relation to the working relationship. These themes represented something significant about each working relationship. I then went back to the first draft of each case study and wrote another draft. This draft attempted to include not only the feedback that I received from each participant but also the new themes that were still emerging.

I rewrote each case numerous times before I was satisfied with the quality of the report. After each case study report was written, I wrote a companion report for each case study that provides an interpretation of the working relationship of each teacher and teacher assistant. This interpretation is based on the themes and aspects of the working relationship that emerged from the analysis of the case study. These themes are also examined in relation to the research literature in chapter eight.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics deals with the standard of conduct and moral judgement of the individual researcher. Researchers must understand the implications of their study and the potential impact it could have on those involved in the study.

The researcher is primarily responsible for the data collection and the subsequent report. "Consequently, the report may be brilliant, pedestrian, incorrect or even fraudulent"…with the unethical researcher selecting "what to illustrate and what to leave out in a way that could be harmful" (Ellis, 1997, pp. 2-3). "Research participants enter a study after signing an informed consent statement that describes the research study, including the topic of the interview and the anticipated risks and benefits…Participants are always free to withdraw from the interview/study at any time" (Hutchinson & Wilson, 1994, p. 311). In order to protect the participants, they

were asked to sign an informed consent form, which included a clause stating they had an option to withdraw at any time without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality was assured in order to avoid threat or harm to participants.

The research was conducted as approved by the University of Alberta's Research Ethics Board. The purpose of the study, as well as the nature and extent of the participants' involvement was outlined in an initial interview, as well as in the consent letter (Appendix II). All possible measures were taken to ensure that the participants understood the nature of the study and their involvement. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were informed that participation in the research study was free and voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time from the research without penalty or prejudice. Each research participant signed a Research Consent Form (Appendix II) that outlined the nature of their participation and responsibilities, the use of the research results and the opportunity to opt out of the research at any time. As agreed upon in the research consent form, the information gathered has been treated confidentially and discussed only with my research supervisor. The tapes were secured so that they were not available to anyone other than the researcher. Information that identifies the participants will be held in a secure location for a period of five years following the completion of this study. Pseudonyms have been used for the participants and the school sites.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

Limitations, as defined by Rudestam and Newton, (1992) are those "restrictions in the study over which you have no control" (p. 74). In this research study, the two sites were chosen "purposefully" as ones "rich in information." Within

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each site, the participants themselves volunteered to participate in the study. It should be noted that all of the participants were involved in working relationships that they perceived as being very positive. It was assumed that all of the participants would be open, honest, and willing to share the meanings of their experiences. The findings are limited to what the participants were willing to share.

Delimitations of the Study

Rudestam and Newton (1992) define delimitations as limitations "on the research design that you have deliberately imposed" (p. 73). This research study was delimited to two teachers and teacher assistants who work in inclusive education settings at two elementary schools just outside a large urban area. The study was further delimited to the two sets of teachers and teacher assistants who volunteered to take part in this research study. Although both sites were ones where a positive working relationship existed, the fact that the teacher and the teacher assistant were usually interviewed or engaged in conversation when they were together could be considered a further delimitation, as the participants may have been reluctant to speak negatively about each other. Qualitative research of this nature is not intended to provide generalizable findings. The purpose is to describe and understand the setting and the participants that are studied.

A further delimitation could be my abilities as a researcher to interpret the meanings the participants constructed as I attempted to understand and co-construct the meanings they expressed about their working relationship.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE PLUMTREE STUDY – NANCY AND JESSI

FIRST CONSTRUCTIONS

Chapters Four and Five of this dissertation presents the case study conducted at Plumtree School where Nancy and Jessi work together in an inclusive classroom. Chapter Four provides an introduction to the case study as well as a preliminary interpretation and analysis of the data. These initial constructions are presented in a narrative format. Chapter Five, entitled "Second Constructions", offers a more detailed and systematic view of the case study.

Coming Together

The drive from the city to Plumtree reminded me that fall was in the air. The crisp yellow leaves on the trees waved in the bright early morning sun. There was a crispness in the air that seemed to herald a new beginning of sorts – one where a new season was beginning and for me, one where my quest for meanings would take me to new beginnings. As I entered the small rural town, it was easy to see why many people chose to live in this town and commute to the large urban area. Flowerpots adorned each street corner. There were quaint storefronts, each one pleasantly arranged with goods. As I really didn't know where the school was located, I took a chance and turned off onto a side street. I could see in the distance a school zone sign. As I made my way towards it, I could see a park area with playing fields. Next to this were two large buildings. One, a fairly modern school was the middle school complex, housing grades five to eight. Sitting next to this building and connected by

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a narrow passageway was Plumtree Elementary School. The school had been built in 1930 and although it had been modernized, it reflected the elegance of an old building.

When I entered the school shortly after eight o'clock, I paused to take in the atmosphere of the school. As I stood there, I tried to imagine the hallways filled with the chatter of lively children. As I followed the signs directing me to the office, I felt as if I was Alice in Wonderland, following a maze. Up four stairs and down a hallway. Turn and down another two steps. Each hallway was filled with an assortment of blue lockers. Colorful artwork adorned the hallways. There were notices advertising upcoming events and reminders to children of ways to be active problem solvers in the school. Soon I came to the office at the end of another long hallway. I realized then if I had entered through the side entrance I would have been at the office immediately. It didn't matter. My first impressions of the school more than made up for it. Just inside the office door, there was a conglomeration of people standing, many of them laughing. I introduced myself and was greeted by the principal, the vice-principal and two very guilty looking individuals! It seems that while the administrators had been on retreat someone had decorated and filled their offices with balloons, bricks and streamers. I was informed that if the administrators chose to go on an administrative retreat on Halloween, no one knew what they would come back to. This was followed by more laughter and another round of introductions. It appeared that Nancy, the teacher, and Jessi, the teacher assistant who were going to work with me might be the guilty culprits! They invited me to

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follow them down to their classroom. As we made our way down another hallway, I was informed that "lots of fun things happened at Plumtree."

A Place We Call Our Own

My first impression upon entering the grade 3/4 classroom was one of awe. Shooting stars hung suspended from the ceiling, stars adorned the wall and in every corner was evidence that this was a busy classroom. In addition, it appeared that someone had "retaliated" for the mischief that had been caused in the office area. Huge building blocks and streamers were everywhere! "Oh well," acknowledged Nancy, " I guess we'll have some tidying up to do! The kids will love that!" Books about everything imaginable dotted the classroom and in a place of prominence were two fish bowls. I was quickly introduced to Sunshine and Rainbow. Nancy explained how the fish came to be named and how the students were involved in the process. Laughingly, she indicated that on a couple of occasions, the fish met an untimely death and had to be replaced before the students arrived for the day.

Jessi and Nancy invited me to sit anywhere. Jessi motioned to a large table against the wall which was liberally strewn with books and assorted materials. "That's my spot, but I'm usually never sitting there." We sat down at a kidney shaped table that was situated at the side of the room and I began by introducing myself and relaying a little of my teaching background and why I was now looking at studying the working relationship of teachers and teacher assistants. After a few minutes of easy conversation with Nancy and Jessi, I felt as if I too, had returned to my days of teaching and working with a teaching assistant. There was an air of relaxation between them, each one inviting the other to add to the conversation. They

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often finished each other's thoughts which, as I was to find out, usually led to gales of laughter. This was a comfortable place, this classroom of theirs. I was interested to see it when students filled the space. I invited them to tell me a little about themselves.

...Who we are...Our beginnings....

Nancy is a teacher with six years' experience, primarily in grades two to four. She has been with this school division since graduating from the University of Alberta. Her initial teaching placement was at a different school within the school division and some time was spent substitute teaching within the school district at a time when no permanent teaching position was available. For the past three years, Nancy has been teaching a combined class of grades three and four at Plumtree. This class of fifteen students has a number of integrated special needs students. As part of her regular teaching duties, Nancy provides approximately 90 minutes of supervision a week. This includes outside recess supervision, lunch hour supervision and bus supervision at the end of the day. In addition to her classroom duties, Nancy is involved in administering school-wide assessments in reading and math. On these occasions, a substitute teacher is hired for Nancy's class. Professionally, she is involved at the local level of the Alberta Teachers' Association and is involved in a number of committees at the school.

The hiring and deployment of teacher assistants and assignment of duties in this school district is the responsibility of school administration with input from teachers. Jessi is a teacher assistant working with Nancy in the combined grade three/four class at Plumtree School. Jessi has worked at Plumtree for the past six

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years. Her initial placement at the school was working with a student who is hearing impaired. Prior to working at Plumtree School, Jessi had worked as a teacher assistant in a suburb of a large city. She had worked at the local high school with an adult student who had cerebral palsy. Her duties at the time included scribing for the student and general assistance. At the time of this student's graduation from high school, there were a number of cutbacks within the school division and Jessi found herself without a teacher assistant position. At that time, Jessi went to work in a new city in the area of fitness where she had received her original training and had previous experience. Upon moving back to central Alberta, Jessi worked with GRIT (Getting Reading for Inclusion Today) prior to beginning work at Plumtree School.

As a teacher assistant at Plumtree School, Jessi is paid by the school district for six hours of work a day. In addition to her classroom duties, Jessi is assigned the supervision of students as part of her duties. This includes supervising once a week at lunch hour and at the end of the day when the students board the buses. Nancy and Jessi first worked together when Nancy came to Plumtree three years before but a different teacher assistant was placed with Nancy for the second year. This year, they are once again working together in the combined grade three/four classroom. Within this classroom, there are a number of students who qualify for funding under the criteria established by Alberta Learning. The school district has used some of this funding to hire a teacher assistant to work with these students under the direction of a teacher.

As we talked together for the first time, Nancy spoke of the day when she was offered the teaching position at Plumtree School and how she came to work with Jessi:

> Basically, how Jessi and I ended up working together is when I was given the position, I was told that I had two teaching assistants and that Jessi was one of them and Tracy was the other. I had their phone numbers. I phoned them and we had a few chats before school started and then we were just thrown into it. I was very nervous having two adults in my classroom…knowing that they both worked with special needs kids and they also knew the kids and I didn't. I felt very leery about that.

Nancy went on to explain that she had worked with a teacher assistant when she had first started teaching. She shared the following information about that experience:

> In my first year of teaching, I worked with one teacher assistant and that was kind of scary for me…coming in to that. I was able to handle it but it was a lot of work. When I think back, I realize I was so busy. We ended up working very well together but then coming to Plumtree and having two adults. That was something different again. During my four years at University, I had had no course work that prepared me to work with a teacher assistant. When I think back, I wish that there had been some coursework in that area.

Although Jessi had been working at Plumtree School prior to Nancy's arrival, she too, had feelings of apprehension about working with a new teacher and in a new classroom. As she indicated in this excerpt, some of her previous experiences working in a classroom with a teacher hadn't always been positive:

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My first few years here were tough and the teacher I was with…we were so many miles apart and I was used to working very independently and it was hard. It was tense. There was nothing hidden about the fact that we didn't have a lot of respect for each other. It was very difficult for both of us. I feel more and more part of a team now. I feel that my opinion counts. Nancy asks for my input. It's a good feeling. I enjoy coming to work. It wasn't always this way.

As we continued to discuss those early days when Jessi and Nancy began working together in a classroom, Jessi and Nancy indicated that there were times when both of them experienced frustration and trepidation in their new positions. I asked Nancy and Jessi to tell me a little more about when they began to work together in order that I could understand what it was like for them. "At first, it was really overwhelming …you need to be a person that can handle having people in your classroom. I know teachers who shut the door and no one comes in," observed Nancy. Jessi nodded her head in agreement and glanced over to Nancy encouraging her to continue. Nancy continued in a serious voice:

During that first year here, I had an occupational therapist coming and going…walking in and out of the classroom. There were speech and language people pulling groups out and then dropping in to discuss things with me. The counselor would drop in and need to talk to you. Belvedere and Glenrose people would want to come in and observe kids and then come back to consult with me. Then, on top of that, we had parents, sometimes on our call that would come and sit with their kids…and wanting to know how it was going.

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All this and then trying to teach and plan for two teacher assistants. My first year here was a big eye opener. It took a lot of getting used to.

Jessi, echoed these feelings by sharing her recollections of those beginning days:

If there had been a year in my life that could have broke me and sent me off to work someplace else, that was it. It really wasn't you, Nancy. It was my duties that year. I was working one-on-one. On paper, I was working one-on-one. The child had cerebral palsy and we were trying to get him working on his own so I did a lot of work with him but with all the outside forces coming in, it was really tough.

Our conversation moved to a discussion of personality and how classrooms are full of so many different personalities. Nancy commented:

We have students who come to our classrooms. Each one of them is different, so you have 25 different personalities. Then you have a teacher. If you add another one or two people into the mix, whether they are teacher assistants or other teachers...that's a lot of different personalities to work with. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

At this point in the conversation, Jessi offered this perspective:

You have to be aware of personalities, the different types of people. Not everyone wants to work with a teacher assistant. Many people work well on their own and prefer to be on their own. It also works the other way. Not all teacher assistants want to work with a particular teacher. If someone is resistant to having a teacher assistant, perhaps if they see it working really

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well as in our case, they might give it a try. We have to provide little steps for these things to happen.

As we ended our conversation that morning, Jessi and Nancy again assured me how eager they were to participate in the research project. They spoke of how it was important for them to tell their story of working together so that other teachers and teacher assistants could benefit. They spoke of how they felt it is important that administrators and staff understand how a working relationship forms between individuals and how this relationship can affect a person's feelings of contentment within their workplace. They also mentioned that they feel that they have developed a close bond of friendship over the years and they were eager that this be reflected in the study. Both spoke of how the students in their class have benefited from having both of them working with them. They spoke about the need to "let people know" how critical it was for students with special needs to have the support they need in order to succeed in inclusive classrooms.

...our relationship...unique and special....

On my next visit to Plumtree, I approached the school with more confidence than on my first visit. I knew who I was going to work with. The initial trepidation was behind me and I eagerly looked forward to the morning ahead. As I entered the school for the second time, a sense of familiarity came over me. I knew which hallways would take me to the office where I identified myself and gained permission to go down to the classroom. Although the seasonal decorations had changed from Halloween to Remembrance Day, there was still the excited talk and laughter of children at their lockers. As I came into the classroom, I was immediately met by

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Nancy and Jessi. Nancy filled me in on what had been happening in the classroom over the past two weeks as if I was an old acquaintance. Her warm greeting and informal conversation put me at ease. Jessi indicated that they were expecting me and that they had been thinking about what they wanted to share with me.

The morning announcements came and went as before. I was spending this time to carefully observe the interactions between Nancy and Jessi. The nod or the subtle eye contact between them as a young child related something that had happened at home the night before. The gentle reminder from Nancy to the students to make sure that Jessi had their home reading bags. Although Nancy had positioned herself near her desk and Jessi was on the other side of the room near the door, both of them kept up a cheerful banter with each other and with the students as they made their way in. Jokes and quips floated easily around the room. "Would you write my name on this?" asked a student as he handed Nancy a wrapped lunch. "Sure," responded Nancy. She took a black felt marker and boldly wrote the words "MY NAME" on the package. There was a split second of silence as her eyes met the eyes of the child. This was followed by gales of laughter as the student informed Nancy that "that's not what you were supposed to write." Through bantering back and forth, the child was able to explain that he really wanted his name written on the package. "Well, why didn't you just say so?" responded Nancy.

Examples such as this demonstrate that Nancy, as a teacher of students who, in some cases have severe disabilities, has to rely on many different strategies to teach and interact with her students. Jessi, for her part, has developed a particular style with the students that at times complements Nancy while at other times, offers

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the students an alternate approach. A lot of the time both of their approaches involve humor. This is a classroom where learning is punctuated by laughter. As Jessi observes: "You have to have a warped sense of humor in this room. Nancy and I bounce off one another. With all due respect to the kids, we bounce off each other and get a little crazy at times."

.... forging the bonds of trust, respect and acceptance...

"Was your relationship always like this?" I asked Nancy later that morning. I wanted to explore more fully the earlier comments that Jessi and Nancy had made regarding personality and how this affected the way that they worked together. I also wanted to talk about mutual respect and the trust level the two of them appeared to have. I asked Nancy to share how she felt about these issues:

> During my first year of teaching, I felt very concerned that they (the assistants) wouldn't respect me because I do things a little differently sometimes. I was worried that they wouldn't appreciate some of the things I did. Sometimes I act a little crazy with the kids. It took time to explain things to the teacher assistants. Sometimes teachers don't want to explain what they're doing but I think that teachers who work with a teacher assistant should be able to explain what they're doing and why they're doing it. This helps establish the relationship. It's also important that teachers model things for the teacher assistant or at least tell them what they expect. Jessi and I know we know each other so well that she knows what I expect before I even say it. If the kids are acting up and I am doing something, by the time I get turned around to say something, Jessi has already said something. If a student

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is having difficulty with something, I know that Jessi is quite capable in

helping them. I respect Jessi's opinion and her ability.

I wondered if these things happened naturally over time or if, in the case of Jessi and

Nancy, they were there from the beginning of the relationship. Nancy went on to

explain that it wasn't always like this, it took time to develop. "You have to

remember, what you're seeing is the result of three years together. At first, we had to

get to know one another. We spent a lot of time talking and discussing our beliefs

about students and education. This is so important because it helps us learn to respect

one another." I asked her to tell me more about this:

> I do have to say, that I think a big part of the respect and acceptance goes
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> back to personalities. I don't think the teacher assistant I had last year
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> respected the way I did things. By the end of the year, I didn't want to come to
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> class. I knew she wasn't happy. It just made it really hard and it was a tense
>
> classroom because of personalities not meshing.

Jessi contributed to the conversation by observing that for her trust and acceptance in

a working relationship is very important. She observed:

> I really feel accepted when I'm working with Nancy. I felt that right from the
>
> beginning. She values my opinion and my expertise. This is important for me.
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> I also respect and admire her. I don't think I could go back to working with
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> someone I don't respect or someone who doesn't respect me. I also think its
>
> bad for the kids to be in an environment where the adults don't accept and
>
> respect each other.

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...the relationship...common ground...

I asked Jessi and Nancy to describe their relationship now after working together for three years. "I'd say that our relationship is hard to describe. The relationship has to be observed and even that is difficult because you're not here everyday." I was intrigued by this comment and probably a little puzzled. This puzzlement must have reflected on my face because Jessi and Nancy both began to explain. The classroom was quiet now, the students just having left to go to the gym with the school principal. This time period, I learned was one of the rare times that Jessi and Nancy had an opportunity to spend some time together to consult about their work. "Often, Nancy is off doing assessments or preparing materials, so our formal consultation doesn't happen as often as it should. Sometimes, I go with the student to the gym, especially if some of the kids are going through a rough patch," remarked Jessi. Jessi, Nancy and I were once again seated comfortably around the kidney shaped table in the classroom. "We can give you our interpretation of what its like to work together but you really need to see it to understand it," explained Nancy. "That's for sure. Its really important for you to be here to observe," echoed Jessi. Jessi was about to continue when the vice-principal popped in and said, "Just want to ask a quick question, Nancy." As Nancy and the vice-principal moved off to discuss something, Jessi and I continued our conversation. Jessi looked at me intently and observed:

> Our relationship is ongoing, every day is different, depending on what is happening...not only with the kids but with us. Our good days, our bad days, the days when we are sick or frustrated. We are here for one another.

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Sometimes, we don't even have to say anything to one another because we are so aware of one another. We understand and are there for each other. You've seen examples but to live it everyday, that is something else.

Over the next five months, I found out what powerful statements these were. On a subsequent visit when I was observing Nancy and Jessi working together, these words seemed to echo around me. That morning Nancy had shared that she had not been feeling very well and had been diagnosed with a potentially serious intestinal ailment. Although it was obvious that she was not feeling well, Nancy and Jessi continued to work with the students but there were subtle differences in their practice. Nancy remained in one location, encouraging the students to come to her. Jessi was doing most of the moving around the room. Although both of them kept up a cheerful banter with the students, there was underlying concern shown by Jessi. "She hasn't been well for a while," remarked Jessi as she came by the table where I was sitting. "We're all worried about her. This isn't the type of job that you can just sit and take it easy."

...colleagues and friends too ...

"I'm getting married this summer and Jessi is my maid of honor. My fiancée and I have finally decided on a chapel wedding. Jessi and I went to have a look and its perfect." As Nancy spoke these words, I realized that the relationship that Jessi and Nancy shared was more than one that existed at work. Nancy and Jessi often use the word friendship when they speak about their working relationship. They talk about being friends outside school. When we were talking together, Jessi explained to me how she makes sense of the relationship that Nancy and her share:

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We're just so comfortable with each other. We have lady's night out where we're all together but as far as having a true friend at work, I've never had a working relationship like this. We talk, we laugh and yes, sometimes, we even cry. Nancy has asked me to be part of her upcoming wedding.

Nancy and Jessi often talked about how they spend time together outside of school. As I worked with Jessi and Nancy on this research project and shared some of their conversations, I came to appreciate how close the pair of them are. Intermingled between discussions about lessons and students were comments about the frustration about the cold weather, the excitement about Nancy's purchase of a new home and Jessi's disgust over how the snowplow had made a mess of her driveway. In addition, the two of them share a genuine concern about each other. Jessi expressed her concern about Nancy's recent health problems on a number of occasions while Nancy worried about Jessi when the weather was cold and the roads were bad. I asked them if they felt friendship was necessary in order to work together. Both Jessi and Nancy indicated that they didn't think it was necessary for a teacher and teacher assistant to be friends. In fact, both of them had worked in previous successful relationships where they didn't feel that they were necessarily friends with the other person. They indicated that "acting friendly" towards the other person while working is different than friendship. Jessi observed that for her, friendship means:

I trust this person and I want to be around her. I have gotten to know her on a personal level. I care about her differently than I would with a person I just happen to work with.

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...teaching has changed and kids have changed...

"You seem to be able to meet the needs of all your students so well," I commented one morning to Nancy. She had just taught a math lesson on two- digit subtraction and now the students were working on individual math booklets with Jessi assisting those who were having difficulties. "Yeah, this year, things are going much better than in past years," Nancy replied. "Some of these kids have so many difficulties that aren't academic, it's hard to remember that. In past years, I used to have so many psychologists or social workers in to deal with other issues; it was hard to get to the academics. This year, even though it's taken us until November to get to this point, we are able to do reading and math in the same day." I followed up on this aspect later in the morning when I asked Nancy to tell me about what teaching is like for her now that she is working in an inclusive classroom. Nancy indicated that teaching for her has changed a great deal over the past several years. She identified many factors that she feels have contributed to these feelings. One of them is the increasing number of special needs children within the classroom. Thoughtfully, she observed:

> You know, there is so much to do in the course of a day when you're working
> with kids in a classroom, little time to do it and inadequate support at the
> classroom level. I don't just mean the academics. That would be the easy
> part. It's all the other stuff that goes along with it. Sometimes, we act as a
> mother, the nurse, the social worker and even the housekeeper! The level of
> intensity that is required to work with students with special needs wears
> teachers out. Every year we seem to get more and more students with special

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needs. Not all of them qualify for funding according to Alberta Learning but we still work with them. We try to give kids the help they need.

I urged her to continue telling me more about her views about teaching:

Teaching is a wonderful profession. It is lots of fun and when you work with kids, it is never dull...I do feel however, that all the personal time that I put into my teaching wears me out. Students with special needs require so many modifications to their program. I find that planning takes so much of my time. Before I worked with an assistant, I was doing everything on my own. I was doing the planning, the evaluation and most of the actual implementation. It is so difficult to meet the needs of kids when you're on your own. Even with Jessi here, we are so busy. They keep us hopping. Once a teacher has worked with a teacher assistant in a positive working relationship, it would be difficult to have to work independently again. It would increase my workload two to three times because now I don't take a lot of work home. It gets done in class time, whenever we get a chance or if it doesn't get done, I know it will get done the next day.

...flexibility and communication...a necessity...

"I'm never surprised anymore by things that happen in a classroom," remarked Jessi. I had just finished observing a student who was refusing to cooperate and complete the required task in the computer lab. At the time, he was very angry and defiant. I watched as Nancy dealt with him. She continued:

When I first started working in a school, I was amazed at how flexible teachers had to be when they are working with kids. Sometimes we have

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things planned for kids and they don't show up at school or on that day,

they're acting up or something and then we have to change everything.

Sometimes, unexpected things come up in the school and we have re-arranged

our day. That's part of school life.

At this point, Nancy added

I believe that an open mind and flexible approach to education is definitely

needed by both the teacher and the teacher assistant when you're working

with kids. You have to be open-minded about sharing your expertise and your

resources and so forth with each other. Jessi and I brainstorm with each other.

We talk about the things that we are going to with the kids and how we're

going to do it. We talk about what is best for the kids. Sometimes Jessi's

ideas are better than mine, especially in art, so I'll use hers. I just save my idea

for another day.

Jessi shared these feelings about flexibility and communication in the classroom:

Nancy is very flexible. I think we both are and I really enjoy that part. We're

very open that way and we have a lot of communication. She listens to what I

have to say and appreciates my input. It has been like that from the

beginning. It was established that it was going to be open communication and

it's been great. It really works for the both of us.

I asked Jessi and Nancy to tell me more about how they communicate with each

other. Jessi indicated that

We discuss when we can grab a minute together throughout the day. It begins

first thing in the morning, when we, you know have a few seconds…before

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classes begin. If we have a concern, we talk about it. If we need to come to

some sort of agreement about something, it is better to talk about it before you

actually have to respond.

Nancy indicated that she is open to working with someone else and saying,

Today, I'm going to do this with the students but I will always ask Jessi what

she thinks. It is important for Jessi to know what is going on. After all, she is

working with these students too. I know that she is professional so I share any

information that I think will help her in the work that she does with kids. I

need to let her know and we need to communicate about what were going to

do and how we are going to do it. It helps things go smoothly in the

classroom.

Nancy indicated that she has seen a change in her ability to communicate. She said:

I've become a better communicator. Before we had teacher assistants, we

each did our own thing. It wasn't necessary to communicate with anyone

unless another teacher or a parent asked about something. It wasn't a daily

thing. Now, working with Jessi as my teacher assistant, I have to

communicate about how or why I am doing something. It's a give and take

situation.

If we think differently, we tell each other how we feel and then there's a

compromise or we look at the situation again and go from there.

…shared Work and Common Purpose…

"Are you coming to the computer lab with us?" I looked up to discover that the owner

of the voice was a girl named Amber. She smiled broadly and said, "You should see

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me type. We have tons of neat programs." It was one of the coldest days on record, with the temperature hovering near minus 40. I had considered canceling my visit to Plumtree but at the last moment I decided to go. As I pulled into the parking lot of the school, the number of idling school buses in the parking lot amazed me. Normally, they would have all departed by now but with the cold weather; it was necessary for them to remain idling. I quickly made my way into the school, stopping to gain permission from the office to make my way to the classroom. Nancy was there to greet me. Jessi hadn't arrived yet but it was Wednesday, the day of the week that Jessi started later. On Wednesday, Jessi was required to stay later so she didn't have to be at the school until 9:15 am. "Grab a seat. After announcements, we have computer," chimed Nancy as she began to greet the students. Jessi arrived, looking cold but upbeat. "Isn't Alberta weather great?" she remarked as she breezed into the classroom. A voice seemed to come out of nowhere. "Is that why you're late? "Late, late...why would you think that? Have you guys figured this out yet?" exclaimed Jessi in mock exasperation. This was met by gales of laughter from the students. "Of course, I'm not late. You guys are getting forgetful. Must be the cold." We began to make our way to the computer lab. The lab at Plumtree is a classroom that has been converted into a modern computer lab. State of the art computers complete with headphones are available for every student. Nancy and Jessi got the students working on their programs and then came to sit a large worktable that was set against the window. "We enjoy working together. It makes coming to work fun," observed Jessi as we continued our conversation about their work together in the classroom.

During this interview, I asked Nancy to tell me about her role as the teacher in the classroom. Nancy explained that as the classroom teacher, she is responsible to the principal, the school district and the parents of students for the education of the students. "Although there are many things we do together in the classroom when we work with the kids, there are still many aspects of my job that I am solely responsible for. She explained, "I am really comfortable with my role. I don't feel like I am the leader. I realize that I am the teacher but I know that Jessi can also be a leader. It's not like one person has all the expertise." She continued by explaining that she realizes that she must plan for and evaluate her students. But you know, there's so much more that happens in between don't you? That's where Jessi and I work together.

At that moment one of the students approached the table where we were seated. "Are we *supposed to keyboard the whole time Miss Gering?*" he enquired. Although the question had been directed at Nancy, I noticed it was Jessi who responded. "No, once you have done 10 minutes of keyboarding, you can choose a program from the bucket." I asked Jessi and Nancy to tell me about how they decide who is going to do what in the classroom or who is going to respond to students. Jessi answered by observing

> Nancy doesn't stand there and say, you can't do this or say that. I have a lot of control in the classroom. I know that Nancy is the teacher, she runs the classroom, she plans the lessons and everything else, but she lets me know well in advance what she is planning. I never lose sight of the fact that it is Nancy's class but I also feel that I can respond to the students the way that I

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see fit. Usually, I know exactly what Nancy has planned. We brainstorm and we share ideas about what to do with the kids.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a rather large grin appear on Nancy face. "Come on, it's our class. You know it is" chided Nancy. Jessi continued, somewhat seriously, "but, hey…you do all the work…the weekends, the summer…I'm not here in August but its our classroom, it really is. Nancy has never made me feel that it isn't." At this point, Nancy indicated that she feels that having someone else in the room has helped the students. "We all contribute and support each other. It doesn't really matter who is dealing with which kid; we just find the best way to meet the needs of the students in the class."

…typical – What's that?…

Jessi indicates that "typical" just isn't a word that we use often in this classroom. Nancy elaborated on this by observing:

> You know, there's not one day that you could even say is even close or similar to any other day. It just changes so drastically in here. One day, we can have an awesome day where the kids are working…they've done everything…they've listened and you go home feeling happy and the next day you come in and by ten o'clock, you're ready to pull your hair out and you're at your limit. Sometimes, you're needing to take a few minutes out of class and vice versa…you're dealing with kids not listening, kids being mean to each other, almost to an abusive point, mean to us…just everything.

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In terms of routine and shared practice within the classroom, Jessi indicated that as the assistant the biggest daily routine for her is looking after the home reading program. She shared this:

> I get the kids their books and I check the agendas. If there is anything that Nancy needs to see or be aware of for each student or from a parent, I show her. As far as daily routine goes, that's about it. Once that is done, it's whatever...whatever is happening.

We are quickly interrupted by Nancy's laughter and protests. "I have a schedule... I really do" she meekly maintains as she pointed out the daily schedule prominently displayed on the cupboard door. "Its just that...well, we're at November 15th and we're still not able to do reading groups and language centers in one day. With these kids, it's difficult getting them into a routine and getting them to know whose group they're working with and what they're expected to do in each group." She elaborated further:

> My goal is...by the end of the year...we can go through the daily schedule and have basically everything when its supposed to be. Right now, art, gym, computer and library are fairly tightly scheduled. In terms of science and social, we cover most of the objectives within language arts. These kids can't handle everything all of the time.

...time...an elusive element in schools...

"We always seem to be running in schools don't we?" laughed Jessi one morning as she scooted by me on her way to a student. It was true. When I looked around the school, people appeared busy. Teachers, teacher assistants, administrators and

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secretarial staff were always busy responding to some sort of need. I asked Jessi and Nancy how the issue of time affects their work together. Nancy shared that:

> Some problems come with just not having enough time. Sometimes, there's just not enough minutes in the day to get done all that needs to be done. I don't think people who are not familiar with a school realize that. Schools are busy places. In terms of Jessi and I, we don't get very much prep time together. Sometimes, when the students go to gym we are able to plan and discuss what we are going to do. In previous years, I was given an additional prep period because of the special needs students and the fact that it was a combined classroom. This year, with the cutbacks, that wasn't possible. It has made a difference. Jessi will often stay late or miss a coffee break just so we can discuss things. I appreciate this but I really don't think that she should have to.

...sometimes you just need someone to talk to ...

On one of my visits to the school shortly after the Christmas break, I was met by a student who was in Nancy's and Jessi's classroom. Carl ran up to me and exclaimed, "Oh you're back. Do you know what happened to Tray in gym yesterday? It was so gross." Nancy, upon hearing this, told me about what had happened the day before:

> It was the first day back after the Christmas break. We went down to the gym. I had told Jessi that she didn't need to come with us. I knew she had things to do in the classroom. That little guy, in the corner there, goes running up to the beat board, his pant leg goes under his foot and he slips. Nine stitches later

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and a lot of blood... I yelled to the kids to get on the wall. I grabbed Tray and went into the staff bathroom to clean him up. The secretary and the principal came to help. Jessi got the call from the office to go to the gym to get the kids so I knew I didn't have to worry about them. She would take them back to the classroom and do something with them. They would be fine. They would be safe. I didn't have to worry. I could spend time with Tray. Even when I got back to class, I was still shaken up. Jessi was there for me. We talked about it. I was able to calm down and take a break without feeling that the kids were waiting for me. It's great just having someone to talk to.

...what does the future hold?....

Over the course of five months, Nancy, Jessi and I had many opportunities to discuss education in general and specifically the area of working with students with special needs. When both were asked to comment on what classrooms that support students with special needs might look like in five years, they indicated that they weren't optimistic that our government would respond to the issues in education. In Nancy's words "I don't have much faith in the government." She added that she "doesn't see kids changing." She indicated that teachers are finding more students' needs because they (teachers) are better qualified to look for them and support them." Nancy felt that "the way things are going, I probably won't have a teacher assistant to support the students with special needs. I'll probably have thirty kids in the classroom as well." She indicated that she felt that her school district and in particular, the administration at Plumtree is adamant about keeping class sizes down and the necessary support in place, however, they can only do so much given the

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money they have to spend." Jessi, for her part, indicated that she "would really like to be where we are now. I would hate to see it fall back."

Reflection

Over the course of five months of visiting Plumtree School, I became very fond of the students, Jessi and Nancy. Each visit held a special memory of them as they worked together. I enjoyed visiting and talking with Nancy and Jessi about their work together, about Nancy's upcoming wedding and Jessi's desire to be the best matron of honor that she could. I looked forward to each of my visits; often dismayed when the time had flown by so quickly yet still respectful of the time commitment Nancy and Jessi had given me. Through the conversations and interviews with Jessi and Nancy, I came to understand their meanings of their working relationship. I learned a lot about relationships and the deep caring that Nancy and Jessi have for each other, their colleagues and their students. I learned a lot about teaching and I was reminded about the special work that goes on in classrooms every day. They had allowed me to be an observer of this special relationship and for that, I am truly indebted to them.

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE PLUMTREE STUDY – NANCY AND JESSI

SECOND CONSTRUCTIONS

This chapter provides a more detailed and systematic view of the case study of Nancy and Jessi's work together in their inclusive classroom at Plumtree School. The specific question guiding this study was: *What are the meanings held by teachers and teacher assistants of their working relationship?* " These second constructions are based on themes and aspects of the working relationship that emerged from the first constructions of the case study presented in Chapter Four. Each theme or aspect is discussed in terms of its shared meaning for the participants. Although the themes have been clustered and presented under the headings: "The Context of the Relationship," "Building Blocks of the Relationship" and "Shared Work and Common Purpose," they do not have a specified order of importance. The themes are also examined in chapter eight in relation to the research literature.

The themes that are presented under the heading "The Context of the Relationship" include teamwork, process and friendship. A section entitled "Building Blocks of the Relationship" examines the themes of acceptance, support, trust, flexibility and communication. "Shared Work and Common Purpose" examines the roles of each participant in relation to the relationship as the meanings the participants have regarding their daily practice together.

The Context of the Relationship

...teamwork...overcoming the feelings of newness...

"We love working as a team," chimed Nancy and Jessi in unison. "We wouldn't want it any other way." Teamwork is the word that Nancy and Jessi used to describe the context of their current working relationship. It isn't how they would have described their relationship three years ago when they began working together at Plumtree School. At that time, Nancy was a relatively new teacher, having taught for three years at another school in the district. Nancy indicated that although she had worked with a teacher assistant before, she still experienced feelings of uncertainty and nervousness about working with another person on a daily basis. In addition, Nancy indicated that because this was a new teaching position for her in a different school, she also remembered feeling excited and a little nervous about her new position. She wanted to "do well" in this new position. She observed that "it was difficult coming into a new position and working with two adults." Nancy indicated that although she wanted to work as a "team" with Jessi and Tracy, she felt uncertain about what this would be like. As she indicated, she had not had any formal training in this area while at University and while she felt confident about meeting the needs of the students, she was less certain about how to plan for and work with two other adults.

Jessi had been working at Plumtree as a teacher assistant for approximately three years prior to working with Nancy. She too, remembered the feelings of uncertainty and anxiety associated with once again working with a new teacher. Part of the feelings that Jessi had regarding this new relationship had to do with the fact

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that one of the previous working relationships with a teacher had not been positive. Within the first few weeks of working together, Jessi felt confident that the relationship would be positive. She indicated that she too, wanted to work "as part of a team."

Nancy and Jessi indicated that although they really wanted to work as a team right from the beginning, they observed that it took some time for them to get over the "newness of being together." They spent time talking about not only the students but also about themselves. Over time they came to know and understand each other, both as people and as educators. Both felt that personality often impacts an individual's ability to work as part of a team. They both said that they had worked with people whose personality conflicted with their own. They shared that they found these circumstances difficult to work in. For Nancy and Jessi being a team meant sharing common beliefs about students and learning as well as sharing common interests.

Nancy and Jessi indicated that they work as a "team" now. They had created an environment where they knew and trusted each other. They took the time to discuss their beliefs and goals about working with students with special needs. This year Jessi and Nancy were working together in a combined grade three/four classroom of fifteen students. Most of the students have special needs and had Individual Program Plans. Utilizing a team approach, Nancy and Jessi met the needs of these students.

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...process...how we do things in our school...

At Plumtree School teachers and teacher assistants are hired by the school principal. Until recently, teachers who had a teacher assistant assigned to their classrooms did not have much input into the hiring or the deployment process. The principal would assign teacher assistants to specific classrooms based on the needs of the students. Although teacher assistants are still assigned to classrooms based on the needs of the students, Nancy and Jessi observed that the hiring process and the way in which teacher assistants are deployed in the school is changing. As a teacher, Nancy felt that she should be involved in the process of interviewing and hiring teacher assistants that are going to work with her in the classroom. She maintained that it is the classroom teacher who best understands the needs of the students and it is the classroom teacher who works on a daily basis with the teacher assistant. She also indicated that in addition to considering qualifications of the teacher assistant, it is important to consider the personalities of the teacher, the teacher assistant and the students when hiring and deploying teacher assistants in a school. She observed that "there's going to be instances where the personalities of the individuals don't quite mesh."

Just prior to beginning the case study, an additional teacher assistant was hired to work in Nancy's classroom. Nancy asked her principal if she could be part of the selection process. She felt that this was necessary because she "knew her kids and she knew her classroom." Nancy mentioned that participating in the interview process was difficult because the principal wanted to hire someone that Nancy was not comfortable with. Although Nancy indicated that she realized that her principal would

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make the final selection, she knew she had to convey what was important to her based on the needs of the students. After the discussion, a decision was made to hire the candidate that Nancy felt best met the needs of her classroom.

Jessi and Nancy indicated that "the context of their relationship" had changed during the three years they had worked together. In addition to having different students to work with each year, over time they had moved from being colleagues who work together in the classroom to a deep friendship. For them, the closeness of having a "true friendship" enabled them be more effective as well as create a sense of wellness in the classroom.

...friendship...framed in the context of the relationship...

Nancy and Jessi described each other as "best friends." As Jessi observed, "I've never had a friend like Nancy. We are close. We do a lot of things outside of school together. Nancy is planning her wedding and has asked me to be her maid of honor. I worry about her and she worries about me." Although Jessi and Nancy indicated that their working relationship had evolved into a lasting friendship, they acknowledged this was probably due to the large amount of time that they spend together during the day as well as their common interests. "We are together five days a week for ten months of the year. We've been together for three years. During the summer, we see each other and talk to each other frequently. I probably see more of Jessi than I see some of my family," said Nancy. When asked if they felt friendship between a teacher and a teacher assistant is a necessary attribute in a working relationship, they both indicated that they didn't think so. Nancy mentioned, "I have worked with other teacher assistants that I really like and get along well with. We are

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very friendly towards each other but I wouldn't say we are friends yet we work very successfully together. It is just different with Jessi."

Building Blocks of the Relationship

...acceptance...a beginning point...

Initially Nancy experienced trepidation in her role as a teacher working with a teacher assistant. This was partially due to Nancy being sensitive to her status as a beginning teacher. She also felt that it was due to the fact that throughout her four years in University, she had not taken any coursework that dealt specifically with working with support staff in schools. She had trained as an elementary generalist with a specialization in a subject area other than special education. Although Nancy felt confident in her abilities as a teacher, she recognized that she "likes to do things differently" and that she was coming into a classroom where the teacher assistant knew the school and the classroom. Over time, this trepidation diminished. Nancy reported feeling accepted right away as the classroom teacher. She indicated that "Jessi made me feel comfortable right away. We still had issues that we needed to work through that pertained to the needs of the students but there wasn't an issue of not being accepted by Jessi." Nancy added that she felt that part of being accepted is dependant upon the teacher and the teacher assistant taking the time to communicate openly about what they believe their relationship should be and how they will function together in the classroom. Both Jessi and Nancy indicated that they felt time was needed for this process to occur. Teachers and teacher assistants need to talk about themselves and what they believe. Jessi and Nancy felt that in order to accept someone, "you have to be honest and up front with each other." They both

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acknowledged that this was sometimes difficult. Jessi observed that teacher assistants often don't want to "rock the boat" for fear they will be replaced. Nancy observed that teacher assistants are often hired by the principal of the school or as in her case, they are already working in the classroom. She felt that it was important for the teacher and the teacher assistant to have input into who they are working with and if this isn't possible, then time should be allocated by the administration in order that the teacher and the teacher assistant can have time to get to know one another.

Jessi, as a teacher assistant had indicated that in a previous working relationship with a teacher, she often felt isolated and not accepted in the classroom even when surrounded by other people. She indicated that these feelings of not being accepted contributed to her overall unhappiness with the experience. Jessi indicated that "Nancy values who I am and what I do in the classroom. I am an accepted member of the team."

...support and understanding – a shoulder to lean on....

"We are always there for one another, on the good days and the bad days," Nancy indicated. She explained that teaching students with special needs brings with it its own special challenges. She indicated that students with special needs can take a lot out of a person, sometimes physically and emotionally and she indicated that it's crucial to have a support network. She indicated that Jessi was a great support to her. She observed that Jessi realized "what the challenges were." As she mentioned, "sometimes, we can tell other people what its like. They can be supportive but it's a different kind of support. They're not part of the day-to-day process. Sometimes you have to see what is happening in order to really understand and be supportive."

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Jessi indicated that she too, relied heavily on support from Nancy in order to fulfill her duties as a teacher assistant. She explained that the students knew that she was not the teacher and in some cases, with some students, that was problematic. She relied on Nancy's support to work with these students. They saw their teacher and Jessi working as a united team and in some cases, this eliminated problems with behavior.

...trust ...something to build on...

The development of a trusting, mutually defined relationship where both individuals feel comfortable with each other is evident in this case study. Both Nancy and Jessi indicated that a basis for trust needed to exist before their working relationship could develop fully. Jessi indicated that trust was missing in one of her previous working relationships. She mentioned, "for me, trust is so basic. Without it as a base, I find it hard to work." Over a period of time, trust had developed between the two of them. Jessi and Nancy indicated that during their first year of working together they used this time to develop trust. They also indicated that they felt trust has developed through ongoing, open and frequent communication between the two of them. They felt comfortable with each other. They were able to communicate freely with each other in an honest fashion. If there were issues that needed to be addressed, they talked to each other without fear of the other going to talk to someone else about the issue. Both indicated that trust is a necessary component of a successful working relationship if individuals are to take risks, make mistakes and learn from their experiences. Nancy indicated "as a teacher, I make mistakes. I don't have to worry about these mistakes being reported to my principal or shared with a parent.

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It's not that they're serious mistakes. Sometimes they're silly mistakes that I wouldn't want anyone to know about." Jessi observed, "in my role as a teacher assistant, I am often asked to do something that I haven't done before. In here, I am willing to take the risk. If I make a mistake or don't know how to do something, Nancy will help me. In other positions, I'd be less comfortable telling someone that I am unsure of what to do."

In talking about trust in a working relationship, both Nancy and Jessi indicated that they would never want to work in a relationship again that didn't involve trust. As Jessi pointed out, "been there, didn't like it and don't want to go back."

...flexibility...taking our cue from our students...

Nancy felt that working in a classroom with students who have special needs required her to be extremely flexible. She indicated that she often "thinks on her feet" and makes decisions about the classroom and students quickly. Some of the students in the class had behavior issues. At times, Nancy and Jessi were able to anticipate what might set one of them off and they could do something to prevent it. Sometimes it meant changing their routine or changing how they were dealing with something. Jessi also saw herself as being quite flexible. She was able to roll with whatever was happening in the class. She indicated that this was necessary when working with students with special needs. Both Nancy and Jessi indicated that they didn't think they could work with a teacher assistant or teacher assistant who wasn't flexible in not only their approach with the students but also flexible within the whole context of the classroom.

Nancy remembered feeling quite guilty that in spite of her best efforts she never was able to follow the "daily schedule" that was posted prominently on the wall. She explained that with students with special needs, it was often impossible to get through all the subject areas that we're supposed to do in a day. She learned not to be so hard on herself. She took her cue from the students. If they needed more time on something, then they would continue with what they were doing. Jessi also saw the need for this type of flexibility. As she mentioned, "things tend to get a little crazy in here. You learn to take your cues from the students and from each other. If you are a rigid type of person, a classroom like this would be quite frustrating."

...communication... multiple meanings...

"We talk an awful lot," said Jessi. "Not just about classroom things but also about us." Jessi and Nancy observed that their personal commitment to open communication was present on a daily basis. They shared similar views regarding communication. They decided when they started working together, that they would discuss and talk about the work that they were doing in the classroom. They spent time everyday "just talking." Nancy ensured that Jessi was aware of how the students were doing and that she was aware of any emerging issues. Likewise, Jessi would provide Nancy with feedback about the students that she worked with.

Although Nancy and Jessi saw on-going communication as important, they also acknowledged that the lack of scheduled time in the school day to communicate made it imperative that they found time somewhere in the day to talk about the students' needs and what is happening in the classroom. This discussion often occurred at the end of the day, after Jessi had "officially" finished for the day. Both of

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them felt that "many issues could be solved or avoided" if people who work together would "just talk." In Nancy's experience, clear and on-going communication leads to enhanced learning for the students and contributes to a sense of personal well being in the classroom. She indicated that she could never work successfully with someone that she couldn't talk to. Her philosophy regarding communication includes being clear yet still respectful of the fact that communication is a process where there is "give and take" between them. Nancy also indicated that she views being a good listener as a critical part of the communication process.

Shared Work and Common Purpose
...our roles...it's who we are...

In our discussions about the specific roles that Nancy and Jessi fulfilled in the classroom, they indicated that there was a clear understanding between the two of them regarding the goals they had for the students and who was responsible for what. Jessi indicated that as a teacher assistant, her role was dependent on the needs of the students and the expectations that Nancy had for them. Jessi felt that she must be sensitive not only to the students' needs but also to Nancy's needs. She indicated that she was there to support the students but she also viewed a critical aspect of her role was to support Nancy. Jessi and Nancy indicated that since they shared a lot of information about planning and meeting students' needs, Jessi was able to deal with the students in the event of an emergency or if Nancy was required to deal with one of the students on an individual basis.

In interpreting her role as the classroom teacher, Nancy indicated that she was aware of her responsibilities, however, she observed that she didn't necessarily see

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herself as the 'leader' in the classroom. She felt that Jessi and she were both leaders. They worked as a team and they both had jobs to do. Some of the jobs were the same and some were different. As a teacher, Nancy observed that all work that related to the diagnosis of student needs, the actual teaching and the evaluation of students were strictly her responsibility. Nancy valued Jessi and the expertise that she brought to the classroom. She indicated that Jessi was an extremely talented and compassionate person who brought out the best in students. Nancy indicated that she believed that teacher assistants are important in the work that we do in schools.

...shared practice...our daily work...

Within this classroom of 15 students, there were a number of students with Individual Program Plans. Although this was a combined grade 3 and 4 classroom, a number of the students were working several grade levels below these grade levels. The classroom activities the teacher assistant and teacher engaged in varied widely and appeared to reflect how Nancy and Jessi perceived their roles. Direct instruction was provided by Nancy and often reinforced by Jessi. The students in the class appeared comfortable asking for assistance from either Jessi or Nancy. Each morning, as part of the classroom routine, Jessi was responsible for monitoring the home reading program and checking student agendas. If there were notes from parents, she passed these on to Nancy. Jessi was also involved in providing some clerical support to Nancy. This clerical support role involved preparing materials, grading objective type assignments and organizing materials for use in the classroom. The amount of time that was spent on clerical duties within this classroom was minimal compared to the amount of time that Jessi was involved in individual or small group work directly

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with students. When asked about the amount of time spent on clerical support, Jessi indicated that Nancy preferred that she spend as much time as possible working directly with the students. Nancy did most of the preparation work herself, often on the weekend. She indicated that this enabled her to keep abreast of the students' programs and it also enabled Jessi to work with the students. Jessi indicated that part of her responsibilities included organizing and tracking the home reading program. She also photocopied classroom materials if they were needed at the last moment or if the students had lost something. Jessi indicated that this practice was different than what she had experienced in the past working with teachers. She indicated that in previous assignments, the majority of her assignment centered on marking and preparing materials.

Humor played an important part in the daily work that Jessi and Jessi did. They both indicated that "because of the difficulties these students have and the pressure that sometimes goes along with these, we attempt to keep things as light hearted as possible in the classroom." Jokes, quips and riddles had a prominent place in the daily routine of the classroom. The students were encouraged to interact in the same lighthearted manner.

In discussing their shared practice within the classroom, Jessi and Nancy indicated that communication between the classroom and parents was typically handled by the classroom teacher. Although, Nancy indicated that she didn't mind if parents discussed things with Jessi, she understood that some parents want to discuss things with the teacher. From Jessi's point of view, she indicated that she encouraged

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parents to talk with Nancy directly, especially on things that she felt parents should be talking to teachers about.

...responsibility...sometimes shared...

Jessi and Nancy spoke passionately about shared responsibility in their working relationship. Each spoke about having an equal and valued voice within the relationship. Jessi and Nancy indicated that there are some areas that they share responsibility in. One of these is in the area of student behavior. They have established a clear understanding between them regarding their expectations for student conduct in the classroom. If students behave inappropriately, Nancy or Jessi, depending on who happens to be dealing with the student will deal with it.

Other areas in which Jessi and Nancy indicated they share responsibility are preparing materials, performing "housekeeping tasks" within the classroom, monitoring students' understanding of daily work and promoting a positive environment within the classroom. There were specific areas that Nancy said involved no shared responsibility. These included formal student evaluation and the diagnosis of student needs. Nancy indicated that she assumes sole responsibility in these areas.

Shared Understandings of Working Together

Through the use of semi-structured interviews, conversations and observations, understanding was gained into the meanings that Jessi and Nancy held about their working relationship.

Nancy and Jessi had worked together for the past three years in a combined grade three/four class at Plumtree School. They indicated that they "enjoy working as

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a team in order to meet the needs of students." Jessi observed that "she feels good about being on a team where she is valued and accepted by the teacher." Although Jessi and Nancy initially experienced feelings of fear and trepidation when they began working together, they described themselves as "best friends now."

In discussing their shared understandings of working together, Nancy and Jessi indicated that teachers and teacher assistants work extremely hard to provide the "best education possible for all students." In their experience, having support and acceptance from each other not only benefited the students but made their work environment "a pleasant place to be." Nancy observed, "I am glad I have Jessi to work with. I don't know what I would do without her. I don't know what the kids would do." Nancy and Jessi indicated that their working relationship is based on trust and mutual respect. Jessi shared these thoughts about trust: "Trust is so basic. Without it as a base, I find it hard to work."

Within the classroom, Nancy and Jessi indicated that "there is a clear understanding between the two of us regarding the goals we have for the students and who is responsible for what." Although their roles are clearly defined, they both indicated that one is no less important than the other. Nancy and Jessi described their respective roles in the classroom as highly dependent upon the needs of the students. They described themselves as highly flexible, with the ability to adapt to the changing needs of the students. They reported that they often "think on our feet."

Open, honest and on-going communication was viewed by Nancy and Jessi as essential to the success of their working relationship, although they observed that "making time for this to happen takes some work." They admitted to "spending a lot

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of time talking, not just about classroom things but also about us." Nancy indicated that for her, "talking is one of the ways we come to understand what we're doing and why we're doing it." She felt that clear and on-going communication leads to enhanced for the students.

Jessi and Nancy acknowledged that the meanings that teachers and teacher assistants have of their working relationships differ in many ways, however, they felt their interpretation of their working relationship was one way to understand these complex relationships.

CHAPTER SIX

THE BAILOR STUDY – CANDICE AND SARAH

FIRST CONSTRUCTIONS

Chapters Six and Seven present the second case study, which was conducted at Bailor Elementary School. These chapters explore the key aspects of the relationship between Candice, a teacher and Sarah, a teacher assistant. Chapter Six provides the introductory constructions of Candice and Sarah's work together while chapter seven, entitled "Second Constructions" offers a more detailed and systematic view of the case study.

Starting Points

I had traveled this road many times before, as it was the same road that my family used to travel back and forth to our summer cottage. The long winding road held many well-hidden summer homes; some nestled around the pristine lake. Small, year-round homes, some in communities and others on acreages and farms also appeared on the landscape. This time my journey would not end at the cottage but at a small rural school nestled approximately 80 kilometres from a large urban area. I had driven by this school on numerous occasions. I had thought about the students and teachers who spent their days there. I wondered if they enjoyed the location of their school as much as I did. As I drove out to Bailor Elementary School for the first time I was filled with excitement and trepidation. What would I find? Turning into the large graveled parking lot, I was met with signs indicating that parking was not permitted during "bus unloading" times. In subsequent discussions with the teacher and the principal I would find out that the majority of their students were bussed and

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that, as a result of this bussing, the actual school day was quite long. Students often boarded the buses shortly after 7:30 AM and some didn't return home until after 5:00 PM. Walking through the front door of the school, I was met by the principal whose office was just inside the door. As I was ushered towards the staffroom, I noticed that colorful art adorned the halls and the sounds of laughter and excited children's' voices filled the air. The school's mascot – a lion - could be seen adorning the entire wall of the gym. As I walked down the corridor, I noticed a small room just off the main hallway. The plaque on the door indicated that it was the "Native Resource Center." Information about child care, Cree language courses and upcoming events were posted. The principal indicated that a number of the children who attended Bailor lived on the nearby First Nations Reservation. As I was early, I enjoyed a coffee in the small staffroom. Coffee, I was to find out later, was made by using bottled water as the water from the school well did not make great coffee. Students also drank bottled water from a number of stations located around the school. As I waited for Sarah and Candice to join me, I read the notices that posted on the bulletin board in the staffroom. Shortly after, I was joined by Candice and Sarah, the teacher and teacher assistant who had volunteered to participate in the study.

New Beginnings Together

The initial meeting with Candice and Sarah took place in the staffroom. The staffroom, although adjacent to the photocopy area afforded us with privacy and a relaxing place to have a conversation. As we sat around what appeared to be a large kitchen table covered with a tablecloth, I thanked Candice and Sarah for inviting me to their school and for agreeing to be part of the study. We talked about the study and

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our respective backgrounds in educating students with special needs. During this initial conversation I found out that the three of us had been in education for about the same amount of time. As we talked about education and teaching and how things have changed over the years, I found myself thinking about my own teaching career. I noticed the way in which Sarah and Candice related to each other. Their laughter about various events and situations reminded me of when I worked with a teacher assistant. Candice and Sarah related to one another in an easy and friendly manner. There were subtle comments to each other and the conversation flowed easily. As we talked about the study, Candice and Sarah seemed genuinely interested, each asking questions about it. Both of them indicated that they felt that a study such as this one was necessary especially in light of the number of teacher assistants that are being hired to work with students with special needs. They both indicated that they felt there were a number of benefits for students when teachers and teacher assistants worked together. As we sat around the table in the staffroom, I invited Candice and Sarah to tell me about themselves.

Candice had been teaching for this school district since graduating from the University of Alberta. She was in her twenty-first year at Bailor Elementary School. Most of her teaching assignments had been either at kindergarten or grade one, however this year she was teaching grade two. Candice had taught grade two in the past. This class of 24 students had a number of integrated students who had special needs. Some of these students received additional funding as outlined in the funding criteria established by Alberta Learning while others, although identified as requiring assistance by the classroom teacher, did not qualify for additional funding under the

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funding framework. Candice indicated that it was important to her that all of the students in her classroom receive the assistance they need in order to be successful. "Having a teacher assistant in the classroom gives me the flexibility and the ability to meet the needs of all of my students," she observed. "I would rather work with a teacher assistant than not have one," she said. In addition to her teaching duties, Candice provided approximately sixty minutes of supervision a week. This included recess and lunch-time supervision. She also served on a number of school committees.

Sarah had worked as a teacher assistant at Bailor School for the past five years. She was hired to work with Pamela, a hearing impaired student who was starting an early intervention program at Bailor Elementary. Prior to working at Bailor Elementary, Sarah was employed as a teacher assistant for 15 years by a large urban school district. Sarah started her career as a teacher assistant while she was a work experience student in high school. She found that she enjoyed working with special needs students and after graduation from high school she continued working in the school district while taking courses in sign language as part of the school district's professional development program. As a teacher assistant at Bailor Elementary, Sarah was employed for six hours a day. In addition to her classroom duties, the principal had assigned Sarah some recess and lunch hour supervision duties.

Candice and Sarah began working together three years ago when Candice was given a combined kindergarten/grade one teaching assignment. The teacher who had taught kindergarten previously had transferred to another school and the student that

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Sarah was working with was doing a second year of kindergarten at Bailor Elementary.

During this initial conversation Candice and Sarah indicated that they had both worked with a number of teachers and teacher assistants before. I asked them to tell me a little about these previous working relationships. Sarah indicated that over the past twenty years, she had the opportunity to work with a lot of different students and teachers. "My former school board was so large and there were so many schools that we were able to transfer to different positions within the division. I have had opportunities to work with individual students but I also have had assignments where I was assigned to a group of students. Each assignment was different because in each case, the students were different and the teachers I worked with were different," she said. In response to my question about the nature of the relationship she has had with teachers she worked with, Sarah shared:

> I would have to say that there are a number of teachers that I have worked
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> with who didn't know how to utilize my time in the classroom. I've worked
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> with a lot of teachers in twenty years. I think that there is a difference between
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> utilized and being used. There have been times when I have said to teachers,
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> 'You know, I could do this for you.' I actually have to direct them. They were
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> younger teachers. I have also worked with some that were from the old
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> school in that they didn't really want a teacher assistant in the classroom
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> because it undermined their authority. I finally went to the principal and the
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> vice-principal and said, 'If it looks like I'm not doing anything around here its
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> because I'm not. They won't give me any direction. They don't want me in

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the classroom.' That was tough. I have also worked with a number of teachers that were great. They knew exactly how to utilize a teacher assistant. The students benefit from having the teacher assistant in the classroom. Isn't that what we're here for?

I asked Candice to share her thoughts and prior experiences working with teacher assistants. Initially, she began by observing that:

> I would rather work with a teacher assistant. All of my experiences working with a teacher assistant have been positive. I have worked with quite a few over the years. The students always benefit.

As this point in the conversation, Candice stopped, thought for a few minutes and responded:

> No, I shouldn't say that. There was one time when there was one teacher assistant…that didn't treat the kids in a kind or patient way. I found her very difficult to work with. I found it difficult to send kids to work with her because the kids were always coming back upset. She would come to class angry. I just stopped sending kids. I spoke to the principal about it. I told him that she was upsetting the kids and it wasn't worth it. At that point, it was better for me to be with the kids with no help than to have someone who was upsetting the classroom.

As we continued to talk, both Sarah and Candice agreed that the positive relationships they had enjoyed with teachers and teacher assistants over the years far outweighed the negative experience but as Sarah indicated, "isn't it funny how we always remember the bad times."

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Over the course of that first visit together, Candice and Sarah began to share the story of their working relationship. I had my first glimpse into the meanings they held about working together. We talked about what it was like to work with someone every day. Sarah observed: "I respect Candice. I've worked with a lot of teachers in my career and I can tell you, she's there for the kids." Candice finished our first conversation by saying, "I like coming to work. I like seeing Sarah. We have fun."

...the newness of the relationship...

The sun was high in the sky as I made my way towards Bailor School for the second time. Although winter had officially arrived, you would never have guessed it by the weather and the roads. We were still enjoying some great fall weather. Three weeks had passed since our first meeting. Candice and Sarah had mentioned during our first meeting that Sarah would be going on a short holiday with her husband so we would have to schedule our meeting after she returned. I had received a call early that morning from Candice. She shared some bad news. "Sarah's father passed away last night so she won't be able to be at school for a couple of days. Would you still like to come to talk to me?" she asked. I remembered that Sarah had mentioned to me that her father had been very ill for almost a year. I told Candice that I would still like to come out to Bailor to see her and that I wouldn't stay to observe in the classroom until Sarah was able to return to school. I arrived at the school about an hour before the morning recess break. Students were coming and going in the hallways, some going to the library where a "Book Fair" was being held, while others going to the gym. As it was Friday, a hot lunch day, the smell of food cooking was in the air. The school secretary greeted me with a wave of her hand. I made my way towards

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Candice's class. I could hear her voice, calm and steady as she worked with her students. It seemed strange to look into the classroom and see Candice and another teacher assistant working with the students. As Candice noticed me, she waved a friendly greeting and indicated that she would come to the staffroom as soon as the teacher who provided her with a preparation period arrived.

As Candice came into the staffroom and poured herself a coffee, most of her conversation centered on Sarah and the grief that she was dealing with. "Even though her dad has been ill for a long time, it doesn't make it any easier to deal with," she observed. "I feel so badly for her." For the next half-hour, we talked about family and the issues that people often have to deal with in their lives. Many times through this conversation, Candice spoke of different family situations that she and Sarah have shared over the years. Candice summed things up quite well by observing, "You get to know the people that you work with. You hear about their family. You know when things are going great but unfortunately, you also hear about the sad things that happen. We're there for one another."

As we continued to talk, I asked Candice to tell me how she came to work with Sarah. She shared the following:

> I didn't hire Sarah. The teacher who had been teaching kindergarten and the
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> principal had hired Sarah to work with Pamela. Pamela is a hearing impaired
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> student who was funded through PUF (program unit funding). I was going to
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> teach a combined kindergarten/grade one class at Bailor and it had been
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> decided that Pamela would benefit from another year in kindergarten. It

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didn't bother me at all having Sarah as the teacher assistant because Sarah had worked in the school so I knew her.

Candice described her thoughts and what it felt like to be working with Sarah in the beginning:

> When we first started working together, Sarah knew me but she didn't know me as a teacher. I knew her but I really didn't know her as a teacher assistant. We had to get to know one another this way. We had to get used to each other. We had to learn about each other. In hindsight, if I had to do things over again, that first year would be different. I would have spent more time brainstorming with Sarah on ways Pamela could have been integrated into the grade 1 classroom so that she wasn't segregated so much. We both had a busy workload that first year and we were not provided with the extra time we needed to communicate with each other.

When Sarah returned to school later that month, I asked her to tell me how she came to work at Bailor School. She shared the following information:

> I had met a man who lived out here. We were married and I moved out here. I had been working as a teacher assistant in the city and I decided to take the summer off. My husband told me to take the year off but I got really bored around the end of September. I went and applied to be a teacher assistant substitute. The first subbing job I went to there was a posting for a teacher assistant who knew sign language but it was an internal posting. It was only open to those teacher assistants who were already in the district. I came home and talked to my husband. I told him that I really wanted the job at Bailor. I

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just waited...The principal wouldn't let me apply until it came out in the newspaper. Once it did, I applied. There was only one other applicant. She probably would have been a better applicant as far as the signing because she was deaf but the student has hearing so there had to be a language development program. That would have been very hard for a deaf person to do. I was offered the job.

Sarah went on to explain that she began to work with Pamela, who was in kindergarten that year. At that time, another teacher was teaching kindergarten, which was located in the teacherage out behind the main school. After the teacherage was closed, the kindergarten program was relocated into the main school building and Candice became the teacher. At this point, I asked Sarah to tell me about that first year when she and Candice began working together. This is what she shared:

The first year was difficult. We didn't know each other even though I had been working here for a year. I was quite secluded out in the teacherage so we really didn't see each other that much. The first year was kind of like a learning experience especially since there were other teacher assistants in the school that Candice was used to working with. She really didn't know what to make of me as an assistant. Here I was signing and trying to implement sign language into the classroom. Candice was very receptive to having me teach all of the kids the alphabet and numbers and stuff like that using sign language. We had other issues as well. Pamela was coming to school two full days a week and then she would also come on a Wednesday to work with just me. I did a lot of pullout with her. There were some things we could do with

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the class. We went to the gym; we went to computers but the majority of the day she was segregated from the rest of the kids. There were a lot of things we had to work through. It was an interesting year. During our second year together, things started to click. We began to know how to work with one another and we were able to integrate Pamela into the classroom more.

These initial conversations about the beginning stage of Candice's and Sarah's working relationship led us forward to discussions that revealed both the uniqueness of their relationship and the elements inherent in it.

…. the development of trust…

"Trust is so important when you are working with someone in the classroom," observed Candice one morning as we sat around the table in the staffroom discussing what she viewed as important elements in the relationship she shared with Sarah. The table in the staffroom had come to represent a spot where most of our conversations and interviews happened. Although I visited and observed in the classroom, we never seemed to have the same ability to talk and discuss while the students were there. Candice and Sarah remained focussed on the students and the activities they were doing with them. It was after, when we were once again in the staffroom, that we could go back and reflect on what had happened in the classroom. I asked Candice to tell me about the importance of trust in the relationship between her and Sarah. Candice paused momentarily and then responded:

> You have to trust the person you're working with. When you are having a bad day, you have to trust that she'll be accepting of that. I have to be able to trust the teacher assistant in that she's not going to talk about me or the class

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in a negative way, behind my back. I don't think you could work with someone if you didn't trust them.

As I came to know Candice and Sarah, both of them spoke candidly about the importance of trust in their working relationship. They believed that a trusting relationship develops between a teacher and a teacher assistant when a willingness to learn from each other and help one another is modeled. Sarah mentioned the following:

This trust means that both the teacher and the teacher assistant are willing to speak openly and honestly about their frustrations due to the fact that they feel there is a shared responsibility for problems as well as solutions. You back each other up. It's almost like a husband and wife thing. Kids can pull people apart. Kids can pull teacher assistants and teachers apart if you don't present a united front. If I said to the kids: 'You can't do that' and Candice came in and said 'Yes, you can,' then I've lost some respect with the kids and I've lost some trust with the teacher. Candice and I have caught the students trying to do that. Play one off against the other. They tried to play us. We're pretty good at discussing things like that.

We continued to talk about this and the way in which issues like this are solved in the classroom. Candice and Sarah indicated that when they find themselves in a situation where the students are misquoting one of them or where they feel there may be lack of understanding on the part of the students, they will often call the other person into the room and discuss the situation with all of them present. "This helps to eliminate these types of problems," said Sarah. If there is a misunderstanding between the two

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of them, Candice and Sarah indicated that they "talk it out." By doing this, both of them feel that they have a voice in the classroom and that the other person respects the opinions and feelings that the other person may have. As Candice indicated, "in a relationship that is based on trust, people can have different thoughts and opinions. We trust each other enough to know how something will be taken."

...respect works both ways...

"Is it necessary for teachers and teacher assistants to respect one another in order to be able to work together?" I asked one day as I observed Candice and Sarah work in the classroom. I had witnessed their interactions that were punctuated by the words "please" and "thank you" frequently. Although there was a sense of familiarity between them, both of them exhibited behavior in the classroom that reflected respect. "I think respect is important and necessary to any successful and healthy relationship," remarked Candice. She continued, "Everything we do in a classroom has the potential to teach students something. We model for our students. Respect is one of the things that we model." As we continued to discuss this element, Candice and Sarah spoke about respect being an integral part of their relationship. Sarah shared the following thoughts about respect:

> I have worked with a broad spectrum of people...administrators, teachers and teacher assistants over the past twenty years and like any profession you have good ones and 'ah, they're all right ones ' and luckily, you only have a few that really shouldn't be in the classroom. Candice is an excellent teacher. I have a lot of respect for her. As far as teaching goes, she is so dedicated. She stays here until six o'clock every night. She is here on weekends, not just for

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an hour but for hours on end. She goes home and does work. I love the way she runs her classroom. She gives the kids a wide variety of teaching approaches. They like and respect her as their teacher.

To follow up on this I asked Sarah if she felt that she could work with a teacher that she didn't respect. This is what she said:

> Actually, no I couldn't. I had a situation like that and I went to the principal and just said, 'If you hear from the teacher that I haven't been in her class its because I'm not going anymore. She doesn't want me there and I don't want to be there.' It was clear that there was very little respect there. I ended up working with someone else.

Candice indicated that she respects Sarah because of her experience and expertise with students with special needs. She also respects the fact that Sarah has continued her professional growth in the area of sign language while she is working. Candice also indicated, "Sarah is a very caring person. She cares about helping the kids. I have a lot of respect for her family values. I have a lot of respect for how she works with students." At this point, Sarah joined in the conversation by adding:

> One of the nicest things about being in this classroom with Candice is never feeling used. We both come into do a job and if Candice wants to see what point kids are at, then she works with them. Candice would never expect me to do something that she wouldn't do herself. If a kid wet their pants or something, she would never say 'oh, that's the teacher assistant's job.' If I found out that the child had wet their pants, I would deal with it. If she had,

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then she would deal with it. I have worked with teachers that give all the yucky jobs to the assistant.

This conversation about respect led us to talk about friendship. I asked Candice and Sarah if they feel it's important for a teacher and a teacher assistant to be friends as well as colleagues when working together. Candice indicated:

I've always had a professional relationship with my assistants as well as a personal one. I am too busy for much of a social life with working full-time and two boys at home to care for. When Sarah and I are at work we talk to each other about our families and I think we have a strong bond. When we are away from school, we will keep in touch by phone. If we lived closer together, we would probably get together socially and do things together with our husbands. I care about Sarah and consider her to be one of my best friends.

Sarah's offered these comments about the friendship that she shares with Candice:

Candice and I definitely have a friendship but it's not a friendship in that she doesn't come over to my house to visit. I've never been to her house to visit but I feel that I have a strong friendship with her. I know if I come in and talk to her about something, I know its not going to go any further, If she comes to talk to me about something, I know its not going to go any further. I don't have that with a lot of other people in the school. I think that's because I know her the best.

...sharing involves giving and receiving...

"One of my favorite sayings for myself when it comes to being a teacher assistant is that I think a good teacher assistant takes direction but doesn't always wait

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for someone to tell them what to do," Sarah replied in response to my query about the perceived need for flexibility when working with children. I had just finished observing Candice and Sarah working with the students on their journal writing. As Candice was giving the directions and providing suggestions to the students, I noticed that Sarah was busy handing out materials to the students. As she stopped by the desk of a student, he asked her if he was going to be doing the same writing activity as the other students. She indicated that he should start the activity and as soon as Candice was available then he could ask her. "I would never answer for Candice. Even when I pretty much know what she is going to say," observed Sarah. I asked Sarah to tell me more about the need for flexibility in the classroom:

> If Candice gets held up in a meeting or in another class, the worst thing for the students and for me would be for me to walk in and say, 'Well, we have to wait for Mrs. Oulton to come back to see what we are doing.' Candice has no problem with me going over to her plan book and saying to the students: 'oh, we're going to be doing reading. Let's get the reading books and this group can do this and this other group will be doing that.' I get a lot of feedback from Candice. Candice is really good at being appreciative. She says things like: 'I really like that' or 'You did a really good job helping her with that.' I also offer feedback and suggestions to Candice. She knows that I have been around for a long time and that I have lots of ideas. At times, I will suggest that we try something and Candice will say 'okay.'

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...our work together....

In this grade two classroom, each day began informally. As the students made their way into the classroom, laughter and excited chatter could be heard. Some students sat at their desks while others congregated around the desk of one student looking at an item brought to school. As I listened, students told each other about the television show that they watched the night before. Some discussed an upcoming birthday party. As I observed this interaction, Sarah shared with me that Candice likes the classroom to be fairly relaxed in the morning. She believes that the students need time to talk to their friends and share information before beginning their day. Sarah also indicated that this time also provides her and Candice an opportunity to talk informally and review the day ahead. "Most of our communication is oral, done on the fly as we work together," she said. During this time, Sarah will often ask Candice if there is any specific task that she would like her to do during the day. Sarah also indicated that it is during this first few minutes that they often discuss what is happening in their lives.

After the playing of O'Canada and the morning announcements, students began the day with silent or paired reading. It was during this time that Sarah would either read with a student or get materials ready that would be needed for the day. Calendar time, which was led by either Candice or Sarah provided an opportunity for one of them to work with a student on an individual basis. I asked them to tell me more about calendar time as it was a time that figured prominently in the day. It was also a time that appeared similar regardless of who was leading the activity. Candice shared the following:

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Sarah has been with me so long that she knows how I like things done. Our routine is pretty much the same. When we first started working together, Sarah would sit and observe the activity. I modeled the activity and she learned how to do it. Now, she will often do the calendar with the students. At first, I would never say to her: 'You do the calendar.' It was always, 'Would you mind doing calendar today?' Now that she has done it for so long, I say to her, 'You can do calendar today. I will work with.... Other days I'll do the calendar and have her work with a group of kids.

Sarah offered her perspective on this aspect of their work together by adding:

We bring a lot into calendar. You know, sequencing, memory skills, reinforcing number concepts and working on oral language. Calendar takes a long time. Then we do show and tell. The only difference between what Candice might do and what I do is that I might incorporate a bit of sign language into the activity.

As the bell rang to signal the end of recess, the students made their way back into the classroom. They chattered and laughed about various things as they made their way towards their desks. Sarah greeted each student with a smile and a quip: "Hey there, good lookin, what's cookin?" Candice also smiled and talked with the students about various things. As Candice made her way to the front of the room, Sarah moved around the room and reminded students to finish their recess snacks and take out their reading duotangs. Candice gave the instructions for the reading activity and began to work with a student who was seated at the front of the room. Sarah continued to move around the room checking the work of other students, often

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reading answers and marking upside down. She reminded students to use complete sentences and to check their punctuation carefully. While Candice continued to work with the student at the front of the room, she was visually monitoring all the students and interjecting positive comments about their behavior and work. As the students finished the activity, Sarah directed them to the carpet area where they were encouraged to select reading material. As I observed the interaction between Candice and Sarah, I was struck by the sense of ease in which they worked. They were in tune with one another, each one knowing what the other was going to do next. I followed up on this in our next discussion. As we talked about this sense of ease, Candice indicated that it wasn't always this way. She indicated that this familiarity they have with each other has taken three years to develop. "It's like a process. We have come to know and understand each other better as time has gone on," she said.

How do you plan for working with a teacher assistant?" I asked Candice one morning as I watched her walk over to her desk and pick up her plan book. As she held up the plan book, she observed:

Most of the planning that I do, I write in my plan book. I will write 'Sarah will work with this student at this time.' I find that the less you have worked with someone, the more planning it is for you. For example, when Sarah was away for a couple of weeks, initially it was a lot of extra planning for someone else coming into the classroom because you want the teacher assistant to do things a certain way, at a certain time. They're not always sure what to do. Sarah has been with me so long that she knows how I like things done. She

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knows how I like to work with a student and so she works with them the same way. It's just part of the daily routine. I still write things down however.

I asked Candice if she felt that having two people in the classroom helped the students to succeed. She responded:

When the kids need help, they get help. In my classroom, I like to get to every kid all of the time. Whether its reading or math...even though Sarah is an assistant hired specifically for one student, the student is becoming more independent with her work. So, when we are doing language arts, the two of us move around the classroom continuously. We can get to all of the kids. When they need help in math, it's the same. If I'm busy working with someone, Sarah is always there to answer the other children's questions. I can sit and work with a student for ten minutes without being interrupted by another student.

"Are there things that Candice does in the classroom that you don't do?" I posed the question to Sarah one morning after watching her work with Candice in the classroom. Throughout my observation period that day, it was often difficult to tell who the teacher was in the classroom. As Sarah and Candice moved around the classroom working with children, I noticed that they both used the same vocabulary when talking to the students. Although each one dealt with the students in a slightly different manner, there was consistency in their approach and the outcome. The students seemed to respond to them in the same way. Sarah paused and thought before she responded:

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Of course there are things that I can't do. You know that. There is certain testing that I am not qualified to do. Candice has the education behind her to know exactly what she is looking for and to pin point what difficulties the student may be having. I don't have that background. I am fine with that. I am not a teacher. It is nice though, that Candice will listen to me. If I come back after working with a group of children and I tell her that I think a child is struggling with a concept, she will ask me questions like 'what do you mean' or 'where was the problem?' I will explain it to her and if she wants to know more then she will usually take the child and do the same activity.

...what does the future hold...

Over the course of five months, Candice, Sarah and I had many opportunities to discuss their understanding of what it means to work together in an inclusive classroom. On my last visit to Bailor School, I asked Candice and Sarah to comment on what classrooms that support students with special needs might look like in five years. It took Candice and Sarah quite a while to formulate their responses. Taking a deep breath, Candice said:

I can't even imagine what it might look like. What I think it might look like, at the elementary level is inclusion. I don't like to see kids segregated. Kids need to feel that they're part of the classroom. Sometimes, people think that's the only option. People don't understand how to work with a teacher assistant. I hope there is more funding for students with special needs. I hope the standards set by Alberta Learning aren't so high, they don't get the funding they need. What will it look like? I don't think it will be good. It hasn't been

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getting better. It is getting harder to get help for those kids that really need it.

I have a classroom of kids that are the lowest academically, that I've had in

my teaching career. They're getting no extra funding and no extra help

beyond what we are doing. I don't think that's fair for kids.

Sarah nodded her head in agreement and added:

Unfortunately, I don't see things getting better in the classroom. Kids need to

be included. Kids want to feel like they belong. I think it would be wonderful

if all kindergarten to grade three classrooms had a full-time teaching assistant.

I believe two people working together serves the kids better. I don't see that

happening.

Reflection

I enjoyed having the opportunity to work with Candice and Sarah at Bailor

Elementary. Their understanding of what it means to work together in an inclusive

classroom has served to remind me of the important work that teachers and teacher

assistants do together in classrooms. I learned a lot about relationships and the way in

which these impact the individuals involved in them and ultimately, the students they

work with. On my final visit to the school, I asked Candice and Sarah to highlight

what they hoped this study might reflect about their working relationship. Candice

offered these final thoughts:

Sarah and I have fun together. We support each other and we respect each

other. Sometimes, this is why I come to work – to be with Sarah. Coming to

work without her wouldn't be the same. Teaching wouldn't be as fun.

Sarah added her final comments:

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I think that it is really important for teachers to know that teacher assistants are valuable assets to a classroom. I don't think that all teachers realize this. There is a period of the day that Candice has as a preparation period. That forty minutes is the longest part of my day. I don't like it when Candice is away.

As we prepared to leave the staffroom, Candice remarked, "If people can learn something about working with a teacher assistant from this study, then we'll be happy."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

THE BAILOR STUDY- CANDICE AND SARAH

SECOND CONSTRUCTIONS

This chapter offers a more detailed and systematic view of the case study of Candice and Sarah's work together at Bailor Elementary School. The specific question guiding this study was: *What are the meanings held by teachers and teacher assistants of their working relationship?"* These second constructions are based on themes and aspects of the working relationship that emerged from the first constructions of the case study presented in Chapter Six. Although the themes have been clustered and presented under the headings "The Context of the Relationship," "Essential Elements of the Relationship" and "Shared Work and Common Purpose," they do not have a specified order of importance. Each theme or aspect is discussed in terms of its shared meaning for the participants. The themes are also examined in chapter eight in relation to the research literature.

The themes that are presented and discussed under the heading "The Context of the Relationship" include, acceptance, respect, openness, support, reciprocity, empowerment and commitment. A section entitled "Essential Elements of the Relationship" examines the following themes: humor, trust and communication. "Shared Work and Common Purpose" examines the roles and responsibilities of each participant in relation to the relationship as well as the meanings the participants hold regarding their daily work together. Within these understandings flexibility, time constraints and shared practice are examined.

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The Context of the Relationship

Assigning teacher assistants to classrooms that include students with special needs has become a dominant and growing trend in Alberta over the past ten years (Winzer, 1999; Alberta Learning, 2002). Candice indicated that when she began teaching twenty-one years ago, most students with special needs were not educated in regular classrooms. She found that during her four-year education degree, most of the references to working with students with special needs were to students who were experiencing difficulties in reading or math. At that time, these students were often referred to a learning assistance program or a resource room setting within a school to receive the extra support they required. Children with severe behavioral, physical or medical needs were typically educated in segregated classrooms and division programs. These segregated classrooms or division programs had their own teachers who were specifically educated to work with students with special needs. When Candice began her teaching career, teacher assistants in schools were also an uncommon feature. Occasionally, a kindergarten class may have had a general teacher assistant who prepared materials and performed clerical or housekeeping types of duties but other elementary classes rarely had a teacher assistant working in it. At the time of this study, Candice's classroom at Bailor Elementary consisted of 24 students, including seven students with special needs. The needs of these students ranged from difficulties with academic concepts to attentional concerns to medical or physical disabilities. Not all of the 'special needs' children met the requirements for funding under Alberta Learning's Severe Disabilities Funding Framework, yet

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Candice felt that their individual educational needs should be met. She indicated that she felt that inclusion was important and she didn't like to see students segregated.

Candice mentioned that this class was one of the lowest academically that she had ever taught and that she was glad that she had Sarah as a teacher assistant. She held the belief that teacher assistants were necessary in classrooms wherein students with special needs were integrated. In addition to academic difficulties, many of the children in the class also had social and emotional difficulties. Candice spent a lot of time dealing with parents on related issues. She shared these thoughts about this: "It is getting harder to get help for those kids that really need it. They're getting no extra funding and no extra help, other than what we can give them in the classroom. I don't think that's fair for kids."

Sarah was hired by the principal of Bailor Elementary and the former kindergarten teacher to work with Pamela, a student with a hearing impairment. Sarah had extensive experience and training in working with students with hearing impairments. She had worked for 15 years for a large urban school district and during that time, she had worked with many students and teachers. Sarah and Candice began working together when Candice took over teaching the kindergarten program at Bailor Elementary School. Candice was quite comfortable with having Sarah as the teacher assistant since Sarah had been working in the school. Sarah also felt quite comfortable being assigned to Candice's classroom. She was comfortable working with Pamela, this being the second year she had worked with her. Sarah remembered Candice being "very receptive to her signing and teaching the other students the alphabet using sign language and other signs. Candice was very approachable and I

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knew that Pamela would continue to meet with success. As a teacher assistant, I was accepted right away."

Sarah and Candice were now in their third year of working together in a classroom. The context of their relationship was different than it had been when they first began to work together. Candice was now teaching grade two and Sarah had continued to "move up through the grades" with Pamela, the student that she was hired to work with. Both Candice and Sarah indicated that Pamela's academic gains and her ability to work independently had meant that Sarah's role in the classroom had also changed gradually over time. Sarah now worked with other students who had special needs yet did not officially qualify for funding. Sarah was comfortable with this as she shared Candice's view that all students who were experiencing difficulty in a classroom should have access to the help they needed in order to succeed. As she indicated, "with so many children requiring help, it's so difficult for the classroom teacher on their own to meet all of their needs. I don't see things getting better in the classroom. Ideally, I think it would be wonderful if all kindergarten to grade three classes had a full-time teacher assistant."

Candice's and Sarah's relationship had changed in other ways as well. Over time, their relationship had evolved into one where respect, acceptance, friendship, humor and support formed the basis from which they worked. When asked about these aspects, Candice and Sarah indicated they felt that all of these elements were present when they began working together three years ago but they felt that they have grown and changed over time. They had created a working environment in which they both felt comfortable. Sarah observed that Candice "set the tone right from the

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beginning" by being accessible and approachable. "I had worked with teacher assistants before," said Candice. "I knew what I needed Sarah to do. I am open to trying new things or doing things differently if it means students will continue to meet with success."

...that first year....our journey...the issues...

Both Candice and Sarah indicated that their first year of working together was quite difficult and at times, frustrating. This was due to a variety of reasons. They indicated that the majority of the issues related to not having the necessary time that was needed to consult together about Pamela's program. These time constraints continue even today. Although Candice had preparation time during the day, this was the time that Sarah was required to be with Pamela in the classroom. Since Pamela was hearing impaired, an assistant who could sign was required to be with her for the entire day. This left little time for Candice and Sarah to consult about Pamela's program. They found it difficult to find time to get to know one another and still be able to plan and modify a program for Pamela. Sarah observed that "when you work with kids, it's often difficult to find 'quiet time' to discuss things together. Kids can be quite needy."

Another issue that was problematic the first year that Candice and Sarah worked together was the conflicting advice they were receiving from consultants who were coming into the school. It was during this time period, as Candice and Sarah were beginning their working relationship, that a number of consultants from the Glenrose Hospital were visiting the school in order to provide assistance and advice regarding Pamela's program. In addition to the extra time that was required on both

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of their parts to meet with these consultants, both Candice and Sarah indicated that it was extra "pressure" that neither of them needed at that point in the relationship.

Although the first year was difficult, Candice and Sarah observe that there were many positive aspects as well. They began to know one another as colleagues and friends. Both came to value and respect each other's opinion and expertise. As Candice mentioned, "that first year was the beginning of a friendship and professional relationship that has continued to grow."

Essential Elements of the Relationship

...support and acceptance...a sense of belonging...

Sarah and Candice acknowledged that the support and acceptance they received from one another enabled them to have a positive and mutually satisfying working relationship. Sarah felt good about being part of a classroom team where she felt valued as a staff member whose "opinions count" and where her "opinions are asked for and required." Sarah appreciated that Candice was the teacher and was ultimately in charge of the classroom but she also appreciated that she and Candice shared responsibility in many matters in the classroom. She experienced a high level of sharing with Candice and some role interchange. Candice would often ask for Sarah's ideas on how they should modify or adapt something for Pamela. Occasionally, Candice would ask Sarah for ideas for art. Sometimes, Candice would work with small groups of students or with a student individually, so Sarah would lead an activity with the large group.

Sarah attributed her experiences of mutual valuing and reciprocity to the environment that had been established within the classroom. She indicated that the

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environment in the classroom had always been "a place where I am valued for the role I do. I am utilized not used." In discussing this aspect with Candice, she mentioned that she felt that open and honest communication was essential to her working relationship with Sarah. "I say what I have to say and Sarah does the same." Sarah valued openness in the relationship where "everything is out on the table" and "there are no secrets." This openness contributed to a trusting environment where both Candice and Sarah felt relaxed and comfortable.

...trust...a sacred bond...

"We have a relationship that is based on trust and acceptance," said Candice. In talking to Candice and Sarah about trust and what it meant in their relationship, they indicated that the development of trust in their relationship was one of the most important elements in the relationship. "For us, trust exists on many different levels, explained Candice. In clarifying this she explained that you have to trust the person you are working with that when you're having a bad day, which we all do...that the other person is going to be accepting of that.

Sarah also indicated that she felt that "trust is one of the most important things in the relationship." In her opinion when you are working with children, trust is probably the most important thing between a teacher and a teacher assistant. She observed that classrooms are such busy places that it's just about impossible for one person to do everything and you have to learn to trust one another. The teacher has to trust the assistant enough or have the confidence in the assistant that they're willing to delegate things to them.

…humor and laughter…it binds us together…

Candice and Sarah explained that humor played a major part in their relationship. Sarah indicated that laughter and having fun with the students played a big part in the classroom. Sarah and Candice laughed together a lot. They observed that when you work in a classroom that has several students with special needs, things could get stressful. They attempted to use laughter as a way to lighten things up. Sarah mentioned that "kids can be quite funny at times. Sometimes a student will tell me something that is so funny or strange and I'll be re-telling it to Candice later in the day. We just have to laugh. We have learned to laugh about even the worst day. That carries us through to the next day."

…communication…a way of learning and knowing…

Candice and Sarah indicated that communication played an important role in their working relationship. When they first began working together, they spent a lot of time talking and discussing various aspects of working together. They realized that teachers usually have certain ways of doing things and when a teacher assistant begins working with a teacher in a classroom, it is often necessary to discuss not only the needs of the students but also some of the routines of the class. Most of this discussion time was on their own, often after the students were gone for the day or during lunch-time or at recess. Candice observed that as a teacher, she often wrote what she wanted Sarah to do in her plan book. This form of communication was equally as important as the discussions because it allowed Sarah the opportunity to go back and review things. Sarah also indicated that she felt that communication between a teacher and their teacher assistant was critical. Candice indicated that if the

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teacher does not clearly communicate what was required or how they wanted something done, it could sometimes be done differently than the teacher intended. She felt that teacher assistants need to know what was expected of them and that teachers need to communicate their expectations clearly. Teacher assistants need to realize that they need to communicate as well. Both Candice and Sarah maintained that there is equal responsibility on the part of the teacher and the teacher assistant when it comes to communication.

Shared Work and Common Purpose

...our roles...different and unique...

Candice and Sarah maintained that the complexity and context of a classroom makes role clarification critical when teachers and teacher assistants work together. They felt that not only is role clarification critical for the teacher and teacher assistant, it was also important for students and parents to understand each individual's role within the classroom. Candice and Sarah observed that working together in an inclusive classroom is "a process and that this process is one of continuous change, where every year is different." Candice found that defining the role of teacher is not as easy as it was when she began teaching. She found that teaching is "different every day" and is dependent upon the needs of the students she has. "So many things have changed over the years. Kids have changed, families have changed, teaching has changed. The demands on a teacher are different than they were," she observed. As the teacher, Candice defined her "official" role as "the person who plans, teaches and evaluates students." Although this sounds easy enough, Candice indicated that it is a huge undertaking given all the different needs

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that exist in a classroom. "I can come into the classroom with all these great plans and depending on what has happened the night before or in some cases, that very morning, we may or may not get to it," she said. In addition, Candice observed that she is responsible to her administration and the parents for ensuring that the students receive the education that is outlined by the Program of Studies. "Unofficially," Candice observed that she is often a nurse, a social worker, a caregiver and a teacher to twenty-four students. She may have been teaching a grade two class but she was also aware that within this group were students who were functioning either well below grade level or were so emotionally or socially immature that they could not respond to that peer group. Candice indicated that in addition to her role as a teacher, she had the responsibility for planning for and supervising a teacher assistant. She was responsible for what Sarah did in the classroom. Most of the planning she did for Sarah, she wrote in her plan book. As a teacher, she became a better planner because she was responsible for a teacher assistant. Candice felt that she must be well organized and well planned herself because she is planning for another person Once she started planning for an assistant she become more aware of what she was doing and why she was doing it.

As a teacher assistant, Sarah had a clear understanding of her role within the classroom. She was there to support students. She worked with Candice to ensure that the students met with success. She reiterated that she was not a teacher however, some of the things that she did in the classroom are the same types of things that Candice did. The students knew that Candice was the teacher. After Candice did the teaching, part of her responsibilities included reinforcing things or extending things.

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...common goals...working as a team...

Although they each fulfilled different roles within the classroom, Candice and Sarah observed that they shared the same goals for the students that they work with. Both Candice and Sarah indicated that they share the same philosophy about children and learning. Candice observed that she valued Sarah's point of view about children and how they learn and how they should be treated. They both felt that all students needed to be included in regular classrooms with appropriate support. It was important for both of them that their students received the help they needed. They indicated that they thought it was important for the teacher and teacher assistant to have some common beliefs about their philosophy about children when they were working together.

Candice believed that Sarah brought expertise into the learning situation and that this expertise should be valued and shared. She indicated that she had learned so much from her. Candice explained that she doesn't possess any training or experience in the area of sign language so it really helped to have Sarah in the classroom. It was her belief that in some cases, teacher assistants possess the necessary training required to work with students with special needs.

Candice and Sarah felt that other staff at the school might not have fully understood what their relationship consisted of. Some members of the staff were unfamiliar with the role of a teacher assistant and thus, were unaware of how Candice and Sarah worked together. Although there was no outward resistance from other teaching colleagues towards her or her teaching assistant, there were still times when it is implied that she was fortunate to have someone to "do her bulletin boards." Sarah

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also indicated that some staff would often remark that "she only likes to work with Candice." Her response to this comment was that she "enjoys working with Candice."

...our daily work...shared practice...

Teacher assistants assist students with special needs in a variety of ways. The work that is delegated to a teacher assistant is often determined by the needs of the students in the classroom. Candice indicated that she was aware of her role and responsibilities as outlined by the School Act. Sarah's primary function in the classroom was to work with Pamela who was hearing impaired. As Sarah explained, Pamela had a limited vocabulary because of her hearing impairment. Sarah used sign language as a means of communicating with Pamela. Under Candice's direction, Sarah often worked with Pamela in reinforcing concepts that had already been presented in class or in some cases, Sarah would engage Pamela in activities that enabled her to have some pre-exposure to concepts that would be presented at a future time. In Candice and Sarah's classroom, Candice was the person who planned and made the decisions about what the students and Sarah were going to do during the day. Sarah observed that it was really important to her to "be utilized and not used." She explained that she had worked with teachers who did not understand how to work with a teacher assistant. These teachers often asked Sarah to spend the majority of her time marking or preparing classroom materials. Little time was spent working directly with the students. Although Sarah felt that these teachers were aware of the training or expertise that she had, they were hesitant about having her work directly with students. They felt that this was "their job."

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Although Sarah's primary responsibility was to work with Pamela, Candice directed Sarah to work with other students as well. As she noted, "Pamela is gaining some independence in the classroom. This provides us with the flexibility to redirect some of Sarah's time to other students who require help." Quite often, Sarah reinforced concepts that Candice had taught with groups of students. Both Sarah and Candice spent a good amount of their time in the classroom talking with students and assisting them in meeting the curricular objectives for the grade level.

In addition to the work she did with students, Sarah also performed some clerical duties within the classroom. As the students were working independently, she assisted Candice with objective type marking of assignments. As Candice indicated, "this allows the students to receive the feedback they require on a timely basis." Both Candice and Sarah acknowledged that there was not a large amount of time available for Sarah to engage in putting up bulletin board displays or tidying the classroom. Most of her time was typically spent working with the students.

...time...an elusive element...

Time constraints are often a major issue in schools. Teachers have a multitude of schedules that they must adhere to in order to teach the mandated amount of instructional minutes. There are schedules to adhere to for recess break, physical education classes, library classes and lunch hour. Within these schedules, teachers teach and work with students. Although teachers have some preparation time, this time is usually spent preparing materials or planning lessons. There is often very little time to talk or discuss things with a teacher assistant. Candice and Sarah spoke a great deal about time constraints when discussing their working relationship. Candice

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indicated that time constraints or the lack of time was the one thing that has continued to be problematic for them over the past three years. Classrooms are very busy environments and student needs' always take priority. She explained that when she began working with Sarah three years ago, there was no extra time given to them in order to plan and discuss Pamela's program. It was her belief that this lack of scheduled time leads to difficulties in classrooms. She maintained that principals and school districts have to be aware of the increased demands that are placed on classrooms and teachers when students with special needs are integrated into them. From her perspective, it is necessary for regular consultation time to be part of each school day. It is often difficult to find the time to plan and discuss issues together after school. Teacher assistants are employed for approximately 6 hours a day. Often, they are only paid for the time that the student is actually at school. As Sarah indicated, "often I stay after school on my own time or give up my coffee breaks in order to find the time to talk with Candice."

...flexibility...our practice demands it...

Candice mentioned that working with a teacher assistant and trying to meet students' needs required her to be extremely flexible in the classroom. She shared that it was often necessary to change activities that perhaps were not working the way she intended or in some cases, she found it necessary to make changes to the physical arrangement of the class depending on the activity or the behavior of the students. Sarah also mentioned that flexibility was extremely important in her work. She explained that teacher assistants must be "finely attuned to the needs of the students and the teacher and be prepared to make changes on the spur of the moment."

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Shared Understandings of Working Together

Through the use of semi-structured interviews, conversations and classroom observations understanding was gained into the meanings that Candice and Sarah had of their working relationship in the classroom.

Candice and Sarah had worked together for the past three years at Bailor Elementary. This year they worked together in a grade two classroom. Both Sarah and Candice indicated that they felt that "inclusion for students with special needs is important." Candice mentioned that "in our classroom, when the kids need help they get help. Having Sarah as a teacher assistant helps with this."

Sarah and Candice described their working relationship as "fun and mutually satisfying." Humor played a major part in their relationship. They acknowledged that the support and acceptance they received from one another enabled them to have a positive working environment. Both had a clear understanding about their respective roles in the classroom. At times, although there was some evidence of role interchange, Sarah indicated that Candice "was the teacher and there were things that as a teacher assistant, that she could not do."

Both Sarah and Candice indicated that their working relationship is based on trust, acceptance and respect. Sarah described trust as "the most important thing between a teacher and a teacher assistant." Mutual respect was identified as an important element to both Candice and Sarah.

Candice and Sarah indicated that communication played an important role in their working relationship. As a teacher, Candice observed that it was important to her that she communicated in a clear manner with her teacher assistant.

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Candice and Sarah acknowledged that although each of them held similar understandings of their working relationship they also acknowledged that the meanings they currently hold are not the same ones that were present at the beginning of the relationship. They indicated that they expected their meanings and understandings of working together would continue to change and be re-framed over time as the context in which they worked continued to change.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF

WORKING TOGETHER

The purpose of this study was to explore the meanings of the working relationship of a teacher and a teacher assistant in two elementary schools as they work together in inclusive classrooms. The specific research question guiding this interpretive study was: *"What are the meanings held by teachers and teacher assistants of their working relationship?"*

This interpretive study was conducted using a multiple case study approach, premised on the belief that an understanding of the meanings of the working relationship between teachers and teacher assistants within each school site was instrumental in addressing the research question and the purpose of the study. Stake (1994) provides this view about the nature of collective or multiple case studies:

> Ultimately we may be more interested in a phenomenon or population of cases than in the individual case. We may simultaneously carry on more than one case study, but each case study is a concentrated inquiry into a single case...We may call this a collective case study. It is not the study of a collective but an instrumental study extended to several cases. (p. 237)

This chapter begins with an examination of constructivist theory and how this philosophical stance has informed and guided this study. I also discuss the connections between the research literature, the research question and the themes that emerged from the case studies. The literature examined for the purpose of this study included not only literature related to teacher assistants but also literature that speaks

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to educating students with special needs, and to teamwork in schools. This part of the chapter is presented under the headings: "The Context of the Relationship" and "Shared Work and Common Purpose."

Negotiation of Meaning - Constructivist Theory

In establishing a theoretical framework for the study, I examined constructivism and social constructivist theory. Gredler (2001) observes that constructivism is a philosophical position that views knowledge as a human construction. Constructivist theory claims that humans do not find or discover knowledge as much as they construct or make it. Knowledge or meaning is seen as temporary, internally constructed and socially mediated. Schwandt (1994) observes that, "our understanding of the world comes from the point of view of those who live in it" (p. 118). It has been important for me to examine the literature about constructivism as it has influenced my approach in studying the meanings that teachers and teacher assistants have of their working relationship. These meanings of the working relationship between teachers and teacher assistants are based on understandings from their point of view.

There are major differences in the beliefs and understandings associated with constructivism. Fosnot (1996) claims that it is Jean Piaget's work that serves as the psychological basis of constructivism. Piaget's view of constructivism centers on the cognitive structuring of individuals, however, he also acknowledged the role of social interaction in learning.

Another view on the theory of constructivism can be understood by examining Lev Vygotsky's work. Vygotsky believed that cultural context and other symbols

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shape a person's view of reality. This social constructivist view best defines my own beliefs about constructivism. It is my belief that the understandings and meanings teachers and teacher assistants hold about their work together is shaped by the context in which they work and the interaction between them. Vygotsky argues that language is considered the verbal mediator that organizes and clarifies thought. Through on-going dialogue and conversation teachers and teacher assistants construct meanings regarding their work in classrooms. These meanings are shaped by the context of the classroom and the students they are working with.

Teacher Practical Knowledge

Fenstermacher (1994) maintains that teachers actively construct knowledge just as students do. Fenstermacher refers to the knowledge that teachers construct as "teacher knowledge: practical." Clandinin and Connelly (1995) refer to "teacher practical knowledge" as a term designed to "capture the idea of experience in a way that allows us to talk about teachers as knowledgeable and knowing persons" (p. 25). Clandinin and Connelly (1995) have also written about the "professional knowledge landscape" that exists both inside and outside the classroom and which is composed of relationships among people, places and things and as an intellectual and moral landscape. Research studies such as this one serve to illustrate the meanings that teachers and in these two case studies, teacher assistants construct regarding their practical knowledge as it relates to their particular professional landscape.

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The Context of a Relationship

The Need for Teachers and Teacher Assistants to Work Together

Special education as it exists today has been influenced by several different factors. Although students with special needs have been identified and educated for centuries (Kanner, 1964), special education has evolved rapidly over the past century. In Canada, as special education has grown, it has been shaped by provincial laws, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, related court cases, and changing social and political beliefs. Until the early 1960s a great number of students with special needs were educated in residential institutions. Although questioned, this pattern continued until parents and educators joined forces in the mid 1960s to establish national organizations such as the Canadian Association for the Mentally Retarded (now the Canadian Association for Community Living) and the Canadian Association for Children with Learning Disabilities. These groups lobbied for and in some cases, operated special education classes.

By the early 1970s, there was considerable pressure throughout North America to change the segregated education experienced by most students with special needs. In the United States, the passage of P.L. 94-142, the Education for the Handicapped Act set federal guidelines for special education services. In Canada, the period since the 1970s has been characterized by rapid change in the development of an inclusive society. Although each province sets its own policies in regards to education, there is considerable consistency in integrating students with special needs into regular classrooms.

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In Alberta, we have seen teacher assistants working in schools for many years (Chamchuk, 1973). Initially, the role of the teacher assistant was limited primarily to clerical tasks and general classroom help. Often, teacher assistants had no formal training. Kindergarten classrooms often had a teacher assistant who would provide general classroom help under the direction of a teacher. With the integration of students with special needs into regular classrooms, the role of a teacher assistant has gradually evolved from classroom help to a greater emphasis on providing instructional support to teachers and to students. In Alberta, at present, most students with special needs are integrated into regular classrooms with the support of teacher assistants. Alberta Learning (2002), in the document *Standards for Special Education,* maintains that "educational programs and services are designed around the assessed needs of the student and are provided by qualified staff who are knowledgeable and skilled" (p. 6). The integration of students with special needs into regular classrooms has meant that teacher assistants are performing a variety of instructional support and non-instructional tasks in order to support students and teachers. While teacher assistants are crucial to the success of "inclusion," their utilization is not founded on a solid research base. Little research exists that speaks to the role of teacher assistants in regular classrooms and specifically, the working relationship of teachers and teacher assistants who work together in regular classrooms.

Establishing the Basis for the Relationship

The teachers in the case studies described in this dissertation indicated that working with students with special needs in regular classroom is a complex and at

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times, challenging undertaking. They acknowledged that teacher assistants are an "important part of educating students with special needs." One of the teachers indicated that:

> I wouldn't want to teach an integrated class without the support of a teacher assistant. I don't think that I could. Some people think that having a teacher assistant means that your job is somehow easier. It isn't. The teacher assistant is there for the students. They're not there for you. In fact, as a teacher, I have to supervise the assistant. Sometimes, it's more work for the teacher but I wouldn't want it any other way.

With the integration of students with special needs into regular classrooms, classroom teachers are working with a variety of support personnel in order to meet the needs of students with special needs. Friend, Bursuck and Hutchinson (1998) maintain that one of the most important factors in making "inclusion" succeed is the ability and willingness of school personnel to work together. Hutchinson (1998) observes that today's classrooms are complex environments in which many different factors influence day to day operations. The primary responsibility of classroom teachers is to ensure the students' academic, social and emotional needs are met, however, in addition to these responsibilities, classroom teachers have the added responsibility of working with support personnel, school administrators and parents. Although classroom teachers often work with consultants, therapists and speech - language pathologists when they have children with special needs integrated into the classroom, it is often in a consultative fashion. These support personnel do not typically spend a lot of time in a classroom working directly with students or

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alongside the teacher on a daily basis. Teacher assistants, on the other hand spend the majority of each day in the classroom with students and teacher so it is important to examine the context in which these working relationships occur.

The participants in these case studies acknowledged that the individual personalities had a significant impact on the success of the working relationship. A teacher in one of the case studies observed that "we have 25 different personalities in a classroom. If you add another one or two people into the mix, whether they are teacher assistants or other teachers...that's a lot of personalities to work with." Friend, Bursuck and Hutchinson (1998) observe that working relationships between teachers and support personnel are heavily influenced by such things as the context of the setting, the interpersonal skills and personality of the individuals working together, the level of training and expertise that the individuals may possess. Friend, Bursuck and Hutchinson (1998) acknowledge that the needs of the students, the ability and the willingness of the teacher and the teacher assistant to work together to meet these needs influence the success of the relationship.

Although teachers and teacher assistants spend the majority of their school day working in a classroom, the culture of the school and the level of understanding exhibited by other staff members can also influence the working relationship between a teacher and a teacher assistant. Sarah and Candice, the dyad working at Bailor Elementary School remarked that some members of the staff did not understand their working relationship and at times, comments were made that reflected this. An example of this occurred when a teacher mentioned to Candice that "she was lucky to have someone do her bulletin boards." Friend, Bursuck and Hutchinson (1998)

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maintain that the working relationship between teachers and support personnel is often influenced by the overall culture of the school. They observe that if there is a common understanding of the reasons why teachers and support staff work together and acceptance of this occurring, it generally results in a more successful working relationship between teachers and support staff.

Teamwork

The teachers and teacher assistants who participated in these case studies reported that "they enjoy working as a team in the classroom." Many schools in Alberta use a team approach consisting of a teacher and a teacher assistant to meet the needs of students with special needs who are integrated into regular classrooms. The practice of utilizing a team approach in meeting the needs of students with special needs is well documented in the research literature (Friend & Cook, 2000; Doyle, 2002). It is important to note that not all groups of people who work together in classrooms are teams. Being a member of a team that works together is a different experience from being a member of a group working together. Teams are intentional groups of people who come together for a common purpose. Giangreco (1996) defines a team working in a school as two or more people who share a common set of values, beliefs and assumptions about education and the work they are engaged in. Giangreco maintains that if teachers and teacher assistants who are working together have not made these values, beliefs and assumptions explicit to each other and those around them, it is likely they are functioning more as a group than a team. LaFasto and Larson (2001) observe that the "essence of teamwork is the ability to identify, raise and resolve issues in a way that integrates different perspectives" (p. 44).

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LaFasto and Larson (2001) claim that people working on teams must have a reason to come together. In inclusive classrooms, the reason teachers and teacher assistants come together to work is to meet the needs of students with special needs. Today, it is highly unlikely that regular classrooms will have the services of a teacher assistant on an on-going basis without students with special needs being integrated into the classroom.

Time – A Necessary Component of Working Together

Both dyads in these case studies indicated that there was insufficient time and in some cases, no time allotted in the schools' timetable by school administration in order that on-going communication and interaction between them could occur. The participants felt that the normal demands of teaching, supervision, and their personal life allowed them very little time to discuss philosophies related to education, strategies and student needs. Both dyads indicated that they found the necessary time on their own initiative, often by staying after school or using their lunch hour or recess breaks to engage in dialogue about what they were doing in the classroom.

A major problem in any team approach is finding the time to meet and discuss business. While some work in a classroom can be accomplished individually and in isolation, most of the work pertaining to educating students with special needs can only be done if the teacher and the teacher assistant have the necessary time to consult. Most teachers and support personnel involved in services to students in schools are extremely busy, so demands on their time are great. Insufficient time has been cited in the literature as one of the biggest barriers to effective teamwork (Idol-Maestas, 1986; Johnson, Pugach & Hammitte, 1988). LaFasto and Larson (2001)

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observe that too often we form groups or teams in schools without allocating time to the team members to get to know one another and discuss beliefs and values. They acknowledge that schools are busy places and arranging time for individuals to meet is often extraordinary difficult. The authors observe that the problem is compounded when there are a number of teachers and teacher assistants working as teams within a school.

Factors Necessary for Successful Teamwork

The participants in these case studies identified seven factors that they felt were necessary to support their working relationship with each other. These were openness, acceptance, flexibility, communication, trust, mutuality and social issues.

Openness

The teachers and teacher assistants in this study emphasized that people who are working together in schools must be open to the process of working together. Both teachers in these case studies maintained that they were "open" to working with a teacher assistant. They also observed that they would "find it difficult to return to teaching a classroom where there was no teacher assistant." Teachers have to be willing to work with a teacher assistant and the teacher assistant must demonstrate an openness or willingness to work with the teacher. Sarah, the teacher assistant at Bailor observed that "in one of my previous assignments, I felt that the teachers did not want me in their classrooms. I didn't want to be there either. In my present assignment, I knew right away that Candice was open to working with me." LaFasto and Larson (2001) maintain that "when team members describe those teammates who contribute most to attaining the goal, the characteristic that shows up most frequently

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is a pattern of behavior they call "openness" (p. 8). Friend and Cook (2000) refer to openness as "voluntariness" or the willingness of individuals to participate in the process of working together.

Acceptance

Both the teachers and teacher assistants in these case studies indicated that "they feel totally accepted by the other person they were working with." One of the teacher assistants, Sarah indicated that "it feels good to be part of a team where I am valued and accepted for my expertise. I am utilized not used." Nancy, the teacher at Plumtree School observed that she felt a little nervous when she started teaching at Plumtree because the teacher assistants were already working in the classroom. She said, "I was accepted right away by the teacher assistants. It felt good." Within the context of teamwork and working together, acceptance is an important element. Acceptance means that each person within the team feels recognized, valued, and welcomed in the relationship (Friend & Cook, 2000, p. 31). Each teacher and teacher assistant in this study discussed acceptance in terms of feeling accepted in their respective roles, experiencing positive interaction from others on staff and a feeling that the whole school environment embraced them and accepted what they did in the school. They also indicated that the feeling of acceptance from each other was important to both of them. Both teachers indicated that they felt that teacher assistants were necessary in inclusive classrooms and they had no difficulty accepting a teacher assistant as part of their teaching duties. This is important as the Alberta Teachers' Association Policy on Teacher Assistants clearly states that teachers should be

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assigned a teacher assistant only if the teacher so requests (Alberta Teachers'

Association, 2000, Policy 12.A.7).

Flexibility

Flexibility was viewed as a critical element in the working relationships

between the teachers and teacher assistants in these case studies. Each of the

participants talked about the need to be able to change according to the demands of

the students and the classroom. Each discussed their willingness to adjust their

practice in terms of attitude, role and responsibilities. Each of the participants found

that they became more flexible as they learned to trust each other, shared

responsibility and felt supported. The need for flexibility in team relationships has

been noted frequently in the literature (Friend & Cook, 2000; Doyle, 2002). These

authors indicate that teachers and teacher assistants must continually strive for ways

to meet the needs of their students. In some cases, schedules and routines will need to

be changed frequently thus making planning more difficult for the teacher. Teacher

assistants must be able to share this flexibility and support the decisions and changes

that are made.

Communication

Teamwork requires effective communication. The participants in these case

studies indicated that on-going communication between them is important in working

successfully with each other in the classroom. They indicated that clear and effective

communication between them was not only necessary to meet the needs of students

effectively, but also to ensure that they were truly "working as a team." Although

they acknowledged that it was often very difficult to find the time within the school

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day to discuss the students and the work that they did in the classroom, communication was an area that was important to all of them. Both of the teachers indicated that communication with their teacher assistant took various forms. For Candice, it was important for her, as a teacher not only to communicate orally with Sarah but also in written form, through the use of daily plans. Sarah indicated:

> I like the many ways we communicate with each other. The plan book is great. It allows me to see what we are going to be doing in advance. I also like the fact that we can talk casually. We usually do this in the morning while the kids are visiting with each other. We're way too busy after that. Sometimes we talk at recess or at lunch hour.

Within these two case studies, formal communication occurred early in the relationship. The teachers indicated that structured discussions about philosophy, beliefs and student needs occurred frequently when they first began working together. In both cases, the majority of the communication was oral but both teachers acknowledge that when they started to work with their teacher assistant they tended to write more detailed lesson plans. They also indicated that they formally wrote more of their instructions for the teacher assistant during this time. The participants emphasized that teachers and teacher assistants who work together need to participate in open, honest and on-going communication with each other. In both of these case studies, the teachers and teacher assistants acknowledged that they felt they could be honest and up front with each other.

Idol, Paolucci-Whitcomb and Nevin (1986) observe that there are several areas of communication that are important for people who are working together in

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schools. They observe that persons on the team who have not worked in team settings might have difficulty adjusting to the often complex communicative demands of classroom work. Idol, Paolucci-Whitcomb and Nevin (1996) maintain that "team efforts often fail or are only partially successful as a direct result of communication problems" (p. 61). These authors suggest that interviewing skills in order to obtain information, active listening skills to minimize misunderstandings and the use of a common language that is understood and utilized by each member of the team be incorporated in the team's daily practice.

Trust

When asked to describe their working relationship the teachers and teacher assistants talked about how they were treated by the person they worked with and how they felt. All of the participants indicated that they felt the relationship was built on trust. Both teacher assistants for example, talked about how in previous working relationships with teachers they had not felt a level of trust that enabled them to work successfully in the classroom. Friend and Cook (2000) maintain that an environment that is conducive to building trust needs to be present at the onset of a working relationship in order that the teacher and teacher assistant can begin to work together and trust can develop. Typically, trust will continue to develop as the teacher and the teacher assistant engage in learning and sharing experiences. Friend and Cook (2000) observe that individuals involved in teamwork must initially trust each other enough to want to commit their time and energy to the relationship, recognizing that in successful teamwork, this sense of trust grows over time.

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Many writers have referred to the importance of trust in a productive organization (Badaracco & Ellsworth, 1989; Covey, 1991). The development of a trusting, mutually defined relationship between the teachers and teacher assistants is seen to be an important element of each working relationship in these case studies. The dyads in both case studies maintained that trust is viewed as both a condition that needs to exist for the working relationship to develop as well as a result of increased interactions between the teacher and the teacher assistant. All of the participants agreed that time was needed for trust to develop. For these participants, trust developed through on-going, open, honest and frequent communication about the work the teachers and the teacher assistants engaged in.

Reciprocity and Mutuality

The teachers and teacher assistants in the case studies reported in this dissertation acknowledged that there was a great deal of give and take in their working relationship. The teacher assistants in the case studies mentioned that they "felt valued as a member of the team." The teachers they worked with shared ideas and information with them on an on-going basis. Both of the teachers mentioned that they "respected the expertise of their teacher assistants and would often rely on them for ideas and suggestions about the activities they were doing in the classroom." Although both dyads spoke of "shared responsibility" within the classroom, the teachers indicated that the diagnosis of students' needs, the direct instruction and the evaluation of students were things that each teacher assumed responsibility for. Areas that teachers and teacher assistants indicated some shared responsibility were in the

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areas of discipline, reinforcing concepts, planning and preparing activities and objective type marking of assignments.

Reciprocity is a sense of mutuality between the teacher and the teacher assistant. It is an understanding that both individuals give and take in the relationship. The sharing of some responsibilities, ideas, information and resources, and decision-making contribute to the development of the working relationship in these case studies. Reciprocity requires trust and time to develop. Reciprocity requires that the teacher and teacher assistant be willing to give and receive support, share equally and engage in on-going communication.

The teachers and teacher assistants in these case studies acknowledged that "although they wished there was parity within the relationship, they knew by the definition of their roles that there wasn't." Friend and Cook (2000) indicate that parity is a sense of equality between individuals regardless of their role definition, giving each person a sense of being mutually valued. Parity occurs when each member within a working relationship views each other as equals and function as equals. Parity, in the truest sense of the word implies there is shared responsibility for decision making.

A recently published document from the Alberta Teachers' Association entitled *Teacher Assistants: Roles and Responsibilities (2000)* clearly distinguishes between the role of the teacher and the role of the teacher assistant. This document clearly outlines that "under the direction of a teacher, support staff may work with students to deliver activities that reinforce and advance the education program (p. 2). The Association's Code of Professional Conduct (1999) defines the duties for which

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teachers are responsible. These include diagnosing learning needs, prescribing solutions, planning instruction, implementing lesson plans and direct teaching related to those lesson plans, student evaluation and reporting to parents. The Code of Professional Conduct explicitly prohibits teachers from delegating these duties to non-teachers, however, the Code specifies that teachers may delegate "specific and limited aspects of instructional activity" to teacher assistants provided that teachers supervise and direct those activities. The Code of Professional Conduct (1999) clearly indicates that there is not parity between teachers and teacher assistants in the sense that it is not an equal relationship.

Social Issues - Collegiality

The teachers and teacher assistants who participated in this study indicated that one reason they enjoyed working with each other was because the relationships were "fun and it provided us with an opportunity to have someone to work with and talk to on a daily basis." Each participant indicated that they derived great personal satisfaction and enjoyment from working with their respective team member. This is interesting to note, as in both case studies, the teachers did not have input into the selection of the teacher assistant assigned to their classroom. Nancy had since participated in the selection process of another teacher assistant for her classroom. Despite this, the teachers and teacher assistants in both schools indicated that over time a friendship has developed between them.

In addition to the development of a friendship, the participants indicated that they felt that the working relationship that existed could be characterized as cohesive and cooperative. In situations where disagreement between the teacher and the

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teacher assistant could be present, the teacher and the teacher assistant had found ways to negotiate and come to an agreement. Both teacher assistants noted that the "final" decision regarding disagreements relating to student needs belonged to the teacher. Neither dyad indicated that they had had any major disagreements during the time spent working together.

Shared Work and Common Purpose

The Relationship at Work – Role Definition

The teachers and teacher assistants in these case studies indicated that they "enjoyed coming to work each day because they worked with a person they valued and respected." Both of the teachers in these case studies mentioned that they wouldn't want to teach in an integrated classroom that did not have a teacher assistant assigned to it. They acknowledged that teaching can be challenging and at times, quite lonely. As Nancy indicated:

> I like coming to work knowing that there is another adult in the classroom
> that I can discuss things with. Discussing things with your teacher assistant is
> different than discussing things with another teacher. They aren't in that room
> with you all day. They may think they understand but it's hard when they're
> not there."

In the past, becoming a teacher typically meant entering a profession frequently characterized by isolation and sometimes loneliness (Little, 1982; Lortie, 1975). Teachers often spent most of the day alone in the classroom with students. They were expected to have all the skills necessary to manage student learning and they rarely had opportunities to work or collaborate with other personnel working in the school.

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This atmosphere of isolation has changed. As schools have moved towards increased inclusion of students with special needs, the working relationship among all the people involved in the education of all students but especially those with special needs has become critical (Evans, 1991).

Each of the participants in these case studies was aware of their specific roles. As teacher assistants, Jessi and Sarah acknowledged that their primary role is to support students with special needs. They also mentioned that their role involves supporting the teachers they worked with. Under Section 117 of the *School Act* (With Amendments, 2002), school boards are permitted to hire non-teaching staff to assist teachers in performing their duties. The Alberta Teachers' Association (2000) defines teacher assistants as "support staff who help teachers carry out the educational mission of the school and who make the educational experiences of children more rewarding: (p. 2). Likewise, Nancy and Candice reported that part of their role as a teacher involved diagnosing student needs, direct instruction and the evaluation of students. They indicated that they did not delegate duties to their teacher assistant that were considered teaching duties. Section 18 of the *School Act* (With Amendments, 2002) outlines the roles and responsibilities of teachers while the *Teaching Profession Act* (R.S.A. 2000) outlines the mechanism for teachers charged with unprofessional conduct.

The Role of Teachers in Supervising Teacher Assistants

The teachers in these case studies had differing views regarding supervising and evaluating the teacher assistant they worked with. Both agreed that they provided the teacher assistant with day-to-day supervision and guidance in the classroom.

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Nancy indicated that she had been involved in Jessi's formal evaluation process while Candice indicated that she has never been asked to evaluate Sarah on a formal basis. When asked about who was responsible for Sarah's evaluation, she replied, "the principal." The Alberta Teachers' Association (2000) observes that in general, teachers are responsible for assigning duties to teacher assistants. The Alberta Teachers' Association further maintains that "teacher assistants who work directly with students are supervised by the teacher to whom they are assigned " (p. 3). One might suggest that the principal, working as an "agent of the school board," is the supervisor since he or she can hire, terminate and evaluate the teacher assistant. Section 20 of the School Act (2002) indicates that the principal "directs the management of the school" (Subsection e).

Reflections on the Research

As a teacher and an administrator, I have experienced working with a teacher assistant in an inclusive classroom. I hold fond memories of times when I enjoyed positive working relationships with teacher assistants. I also remember times when I have worked with teacher assistants that was confusing for the teacher assistant and me. As a school principal, I have been responsible for evaluations of teachers and teacher assistants. I have seen firsthand how some of these working relationships evolve but I felt there needed to be qualitative data to more fully illuminate the qualities inherent in these relationships. Thus, when I began my research, it was to explore the meanings of teacher and teacher assistants' working relationships. Since I wanted to explore the subtleties and nuances of such interactions in some depth, I chose to undertake a descriptive and interpretive multiple case study. My own stance

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as an educator and researcher was ever present in the conceptualization of the study, in the research design and methodology, and in the descriptive and interpretive accounts. The philosophical framework of constructivism was central to this study both as a methodological framework for inquiry and as a theoretical framework for understanding how teachers and teacher assistants construct meanings about their work.

One of the greatest delights of conducting this research study was coming to know each teacher and teacher assistant. I continue to believe that the work that teachers and teacher assistants do every day in classrooms is of great importance. It was a privilege to spend time in classrooms where the purpose was not to judge, evaluate or recommend change, but to describe and interpret the participants' meanings of working together. The teachers and teacher assistants indicated that it was affirming for them because each enjoyed the opportunity to share their understandings of working together. The findings of this study strengthen and affirm my desire to continue to advocate and support the work of teachers and teacher assistants.

As I conducted my review of the literature, it was readily apparent that the literature on teacher and teacher assistant work is not far ranging. I felt that a multiple case study, such as this, could contribute new understandings to a relatively small body of literature.

Summary and Implications of the Findings

This study's constructions and interpretations attempt to capture the individualistic, complex and contextually bounded way in which teachers and teacher assistants work together. In listening to the teachers and teacher assistants discuss their experiences of working together, I was struck by the depth of caring of these individuals and the level of reflection and introspection they displayed. Each participant discussed their understandings of their working relationship with each other openly and willingly. I found them eager and willing to open their classrooms to my observation. I spent approximately five months in their classrooms and I collected a great amount of data, most of which, I believe was relevant to the research question. The many observations, interviews, informal conversations and resulting field notes enabled me to more fully understand the working relationship of each teacher and teacher assistant dyad.

Implications

In Alberta the number of teacher assistants working in regular classrooms continues to increase. I believe this research provides a firm foundation for understanding the working relationship between teachers and teacher assistants. The findings of this research study have implications for practice for a range of stakeholders.

In the first instance, the findings have implications for teachers and teacher assistants, for whom the findings might prompt reflection, inquiry and discussion as to the nature of their own practice. The findings of this study may also serve as a

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basis for beginning teachers and teacher assistants as they enter professional work relationships.

This study also has implications for those involved in the pre-service education of teachers and those involved in the training of teacher assistants. Within both disciplines, there is a need for course work and practical experience related to teamwork. It is imperative that pre-service teachers enrolled in a generalist program to be made aware of the roles and responsibilities associated with working with teacher assistants. It is also critical that during the practicum component of the teacher education program students have the opportunity to work directly with teacher assistants. It is also recommended that students in teacher assistant programs have an understanding of the roles and responsibilities associated with the teaching profession.

In terms of policy related to teachers and teacher assistants, this study indicates that there is a need for Alberta Learning to examine the work that teachers and teacher assistants do in schools and to develop guidelines and/or policies regarding teacher assistants in order to ensure consistency across the province. At present, there are no explicit policies in this area.

At the school level, this study has raised some important issues for consideration. As a school principal, this research has reminded me of the necessity of finding ways in which time is allocated for teachers and teacher assistants to discuss and reflect upon their practice as part of their regular working day. It is also critically important for all staff working in schools to have a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities associated with each position.

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The working relationship between teachers and teacher assistants is a complex one with many components and characteristics. I hope that those teachers and teacher assistants who read this study will experience a resonance with the descriptive and interpretive account and feel a sense of affirmation in regard to the work they are doing together or can do with each other. It is my hope that the findings will inform and inspire teachers and teacher assistants to continue to work together for the benefit of all students.

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APPENDIX 1

PILOT STUDY

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APPENDIX I

PILOT STUDY

Introduction

In Alberta, over the last decade several factors have converged to create situations where teachers and a myriad of support personnel work together to provide educational programs for students. The purpose of my intended doctoral dissertation is to examine the perceptions held by teachers and teachers' assistants of their working relationship. The inclusion of students with special needs has been one of the main reasons that Alberta has seen an increase in the number of educational assistants working in schools. Educational assistants constitute part of what, in the education community, are known as support staff. This term designates personnel who help teachers carry out the educational mission of the school and who make the educational experience of children more rewarding (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2000). Some support staff who work in schools are highly qualified professionals who provide specialized services to students. Examples of these types of individuals include speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists and physical therapists. Educational assistants, on the other hand, may be individuals who have non-professionals credentials earned through college studies or in some case, no certification at all.

The Alberta Teachers' Association (2000) in their publication "Teachers and Teacher' Assistants: Roles and Responsibilities" (p. 13) trace the historical context of the growth of non-certificated school staff in Alberta. In their ATA Position Paper on Teacher Assistants written in 1973 and revised in 1993 they indicate:

> "By 1970, a number of circumstances had combined to put pressure on school boards in Alberta to increase the number of teachers' assistants and extend their function in schools. Financial pressures encouraged boards to provide clerical and special services in a manner thought to reduce inefficiencies. Why pay "high" salaried teachers to take attendance, keep records of book

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rentals and issue audio-visual equipment? These duties could be assigned to other, less costly, personnel.

The new financial avenue of federal Local Initiatives Program grants and the general public attitude towards education expenses also reflected a political force. Boards became concerned about threats to sources of funding such as the growing resistance of taxpayers to increases in property taxes. If parents could become more involved in the schools through voluntary and other money-saving programs then the chances of boards for re-election and budget approval would improve. The hue and cry for accountability in education could be answered at least partially by a proliferation of volunteer projects, which would also provide an avenue for parents to have a task to do when entering the school rather than enter as somewhat edgy and uncomfortable visitors. It is an uncommon assumption that the involved parent usually will be supportive of the school program.

There was also a social pressure for increased use of teachers' assistants. In time of increasing leisure, volunteer tasks became significant as a means of releasing energy and achieving self-fulfillment. At precisely the time when the general population is becoming better educated, the number of satisfying jobs being developed is not keeping pace with the demand. Many citizens feel the need to give help in socially acceptable projects; volunteer social projects are a means for an individual's participation in society.

These economic, political and social forces combined to encourage boards to extend the possibilities for using non-certificated volunteer and paid personnel in schools. Boards hired not only secretaries but media technicians, business managers, library technicians, coaches and tutors. Volunteer tutors and supervisors were also added to the list in increasing numbers. Although staffing the school with more adults was intended to alleviate problems, the

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resulting push in teachers' assistants staffing brought with it its own host of complex problems."

In 1996, Alberta Education drafted and adopted Policy 1.6.1 in relation to "the educational Placements of Students with Special Needs." This policy states:

"Regular classrooms in neighborhood or local schools shall be the first placement options considered by school boards."

Although there is a certain amount of flexibility for school boards when interpreting this policy, the overall result has been that there has been an increase of students with special needs being educated in their neighborhood school. This has resulted in a significant number of educational assistants being hired to work with teachers.

Purpose of the Pilot Study

During February and March of 2002, I conducted a pilot study in order to ascertain the suitability of the research questions, test the interview instruments and other data collection strategies; and test the data analysis procedures. A pilot study is useful for testing many aspects of proposed research. Glesne (1998) maintains that researchers enter a pilot study with a different frame of mind from the one they have going into the actual research study. The idea is not to get data per se, but to learn more about the research process, interview questions, observation techniques and the role of the researcher.

The Research Question

The research question driving this pilot study is *"What are the perceptions held by teachers and teacher assistants of their working relationship?"* Since this is a pilot study, designed to evaluate the quality of the interview questions themselves, the following are the questions that were probed:

- How clear are the questions from the perspective of a teacher?
- How clear are the questions from the perspective of a teacher assistant?
- Are the questions appropriate given the proposed topic?
- Is the language of the questions appropriate and clear?
- What else should I be asking?

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These questions were not intended to be in a "yes and no" format. They were loosely defined in order that each participant can give as much feedback as possible.

I struggled a great deal formulating the set of interview questions that I hope to use in the actual study. When I began the process of drafting interview questions for the study, I originally had thirty-six interview questions. I thought they were all pretty relevant and important questions. Upon reflection and discussion with "critical friends," I began to see that many of the questions were redundant. I then reworked the interview questions; eventually settling upon fourteen questions, which I felt, captured my intent (See Appendix A). I then formulated the pilot study questions which, I hoped would provide me with input about the appropriateness and relevancy of these questions.

Now that the pilot study has been completed, one of the most important findings was that there are still too many questions. I have once again clustered and reworked the questions to a possible ten questions.

Method

Two elementary schools within the immediate vicinity of Edmonton were selected to conduct this pilot study. The selection was based on the school's reputation for having a high number of teacher assistants and teachers working in inclusive classrooms. The site selection was also based on the feedback I received from the principal, teachers and teacher assistants who indicated that they would enjoy working through this process.

The ethics of negotiating access

I believed that I could negotiate access into these two school sites with greater ease because I knew the staff I was negotiating with and I have had many opportunities to work with these schools in the past. Initially I was concerned that the staff may feel threatened. I am aware that my role as principal in the school district might be perceived by some as contributing to this. As I hoped for open and honest interviews and feedback, it was essential to clarify the purpose of the pilot study and the ethics review. Even though I was known by most of the participants, I still found myself having to establish rapport with them. It was a different kind of rapport than if I was a teacher or a principal working with them. Here I was a graduate student

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from the University of Alberta doing a pilot study, which spoke to their lived experiences. I wanted them to view this study as a means providing information or new knowledge to the field of education. I found that they wanted to talk about my studies and why I was interested in engaging in this type of study. I did not take their comments to be filled with suspicion, but rather with a sense of celebration of what I was doing.

Even though I was known to each of these participants, I found myself ensuring that I approached this pilot study from an ethical stance as was outlined in my ethics review. I made contact with the principals of each school, who I believe serve as the gatekeeper (Cresswell, 1998). I wanted the principal of the school to be comfortable with what I was about to ask of the staff. In both cases, these individuals indicated that they supported my intentions. They made some suggestions as to possible participants but also indicated that the final decision to participate had to be that of the individual staff member. What I did find problematic, however, is that once the initial interview was completed with one of the participants, one of the principals asked me how the interview went. I didn't find this question too problematic but I did begin to feel a sense of unease when the next question asked about specific information that a participant had given me. I indicated that because of the ethical review and the issues of confidentiality, that I couldn't share this information, it appeared to cause a sense of discomfort for both of us until we went on to another topic. At the time, I was wishing that this hadn't occurred but now, after reflecting upon this incident, I was almost happy that it did. It has forced me to think through some of these ethical issues.

I selected two participants from two different elementary schools. The fact that both of these schools were elementary could be seen as a limitation in a study. For the purpose of this pilot study, no junior high or high school indicated that they wish to be involved. A further possible limitation to this pilot study is the fact that all four of the participants were female. Again, this was due to the fact that only females had indicated a preference for involvement. This may be a factor, however, that should be examined when designing the actual study.

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I met with each participant before beginning the interviews in order to introduce myself and explain the purpose of the pilot study, the procedures for the interviews and the ethical considerations. The precautions taken for ensuring anonymity and confidentiality were explained at the initial meeting, as well as the participant's right to opt out of the study at any time. An outline of how member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) were to be conducted was also given.

Although initially appearing simple, the actual process of collecting the data entailed complex decisions and actions. Simply choosing "interviewing" was not a choice. My choice of technique can be traced back to my views on epistemology and the specific qualitative genre to which my study is linked.

Qualitative researchers must decide how deeply or broadly to employ data gathering techniques. Considering Marshall and Rossman's (1999) triangle of do-ability, want-to-do-ability and should-do-ability, I was faced with making choices. As this was intended to be a pilot study, my reason for focussing on a few participants was that it would encourage an in-depth understanding of the questions posed. Drafting the interview questions encouraged me to think about about how tightly I wanted to control the topic.

I decided to gather data primarily through two sets of semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with two teachers and two teacher assistants. Both sites were at the elementary level.

The Interview

Interviews have played a significant role in educational research throughout the past century. The qualitative interview has become prevalent in research and in theoretical and policy-related discussions in the field of education (Tierney & Dilley, 2002).

Denzin and Lincoln (1998) observe that the interview is the favorite methodological instrument of the qualitative researcher. The manner in which such research has been carried out has varied greatly, depending on the interests of the researcher, the theoretical frameworks utilized and the questions put forth. Tierney & Dilley (2002) observe that "rather than taking a "one size-fits-all approach" to interviewing, educational researchers have been remarkably diverse in the ways they have applied

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the interviewing process. Qualitative interviewing can be used to gather information that cannot be obtained using other methods. Scholars, like Denzin & Lincoln (1998) maintain that the interview is a conversation, the art of asking questions and listening. Asking questions and securing responses is a much harder task than may be obvious at first glance. Fontana & Frey (1998) observe that the spoken or written word always has a residue of ambiguity, no matter how carefully we word the questions and report the findings. The researcher conducting the interview creates the parameters of the interview situation. The interview produces situated understandings grounded in specific interactional episodes (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). The interview is influenced by the personal characteristics of the interviewer. In spite of these factors, interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand the participants in our research study.

The History of Interviewing

Although the interview is used frequently today, the interview as a procedure for securing knowledge, is relatively new historically (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). In ancient history, the Egyptians conducted censuses of their population (Babbie, 1992). In more modern times, interviewing has been used more frequently in counseling and psychological testing (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Charles Booth (see Converse 1987) has been credited with developing a social survey relying on interviewing. The interview has existed and changed over time, both as a practice and as a methodological term. Platt (2002) maintains that the practice of interviewing has not always been distinguished form other methods of collecting information. She elaborates by stating "interviewing has sometimes been treated as a distinct method, but more often it has been located within some broader methodological category, such as survey, case study or life story (p.33)."

Data Analysis

All four participants took part in the first interview. The interviews lasted thirty – sixty minutes during which time I also took field notes and used a tape recorder. The issue of the tape recorder was initially problematic. Even though each participant knew that the interview(s) were to be recorded, three out of the four participants made some type of comment when they saw the tape recorder. One even

asked "Are you sure you want to actually use that thing. I sound so awful on it."
After I assured them again that I would be doing the actual transcriptions and that I
couldn't write fast enough to capture everything they had to say, they moved on. I
had asked the principal at each site to suggest a place where the interview could be
held. One principal indicated that we could use her office. For the first interview we
did, however, one of the participant indicated that she felt uncomfortable in this
setting and requested that the next time we us the special needs office down the hall.
She further elaborated that since the principal's office is centrally located, there are a
number of distractions for her due to the large windows that lookout into the general
office area. This comment has encouraged me to carefully consider the location that
has been chosen for the interview. In this pilot study, I asked the principal of each
site to suggest the location but I did not ask each participant if they felt comfortable
with the location. During this first interview, the questions that were developed for
use during the actual research study were asked (See Appendix A). These questions
were followed up by the pilot study questions (See Appendix B). After the transcribed
interviews were given back to each participant, each was given an opportunity to
participate in a second interview. The second set of interviews was based upon topics
determined by the participants once they had reviewed the transcripts of the first
interview. Only two participants were interviewed for a second time. The remaining
two participants indicated that they didn't have anything further to add to their initial
interview.

Content analysis was conducted on the interview transcriptions and field
notes. A written audit trail (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) was maintained throughout the
six-week study as data was collected and analyzed. The audit trail provided a written
record of concerns, questions and decisions that were made. As I reviewed the data
collected from this pilot study, I am struck by the amount of data that I have gathered
especially when I realize that in my actual study, I will be collecting data from
multiple sources so not only will I have the interview data but I will also have the
observation data as well. The need for a filing system or a way in wish to categorize
my data is important. I often found myself searching through transcripts or re-reading
field texts in order to find something that I thought I had heard or read.

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In relation to the interview process

Rossman and Rallis (1998) refer to the interview as "a conversation with a purpose." This sounds easier than it is! I found the interview process very stressful and taxing. I was worried about my recording equipment and what I was going to do if it didn't work. After the first interview, I took to using a second machine as a back up.

As I entered the first interview, I had a semi-structured set of questions (See Appendix A). I had every intention of starting with the interview right away but soon found that it was necessary to "break the ice" by talking generally about the state of education and our current positions. I then moved on to the discussing the study as had been outlined on the ethics review and then I moved into the actual interview. This all took longer than I expected and I felt pressured by "time" as we proceeded through the interview. I didn't want to outstay my welcome. As we talked, the negotiated flow and organization of the interview depended on the subtle interactions that occurred between the participant and myself. For example, during an interview with a teacher assistant, I happened to look down at the page of interview questions and the teacher assistant inquired:

Teacher Assistant: "Am I talking too much? Do we still have a lot of questions to go? I guess you must be bored with hearing all of this stuff...."

(Interview 1 – TA 2)

This ebb and flow is also demonstrated in the following excerpt from a transcript:

Researcher: "Is there anything else you would like to add?"

Teacher: "Well, I don't think so...."

Field Notes reflect that researcher flipped back through the interview questions.

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Teacher:	"Well, maybe I could add something to question #5."

A significant amount of the questions that will be used in the actual study focussed on the working relationship between the teacher and teacher assistant. When each participant was asked if there were any questions which were not appropriate, all of the participants in this pilot study remarked in some way that careful handling of the information was going to be necessary because there is a chance the information could damage or hurt a participant's feelings. Examples from the transcripts include:

Researcher:	"Are there any questions that are not appropriate?"

Teacher Assistant:	"It's not that I think any of the questions should be asked, its just that worry if what I say may be taken in the wrong way..."

(Interview – TA 1)

Teacher Assistant:	"I hope that my answers to any of the questions are not seen as negative. I really respect the teacher I work with but I also think that looking at the nature of our working relationship is so important..."

(Interview – TA 2)

Teacher:	" All of the questions are good questions. You might want to be careful in how they are interpreted and in who sees the

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answers so that they're not taken out of
context..."

<div align="right">(Interview – Teacher 2)</div>

In relation to the general research question:

While conducting the pilot study, it became clear to me that each participant brought her own perspective on the working relationship between teachers and teacher assistants to the interviews and that these perspectives reflected their individual interpretations of the experience. This prompted me to reflect upon my own experiences and assumptions about the working relationship that I have experienced as I have worked with teacher assistants. Further readings on constructivisim (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Stake 1995) helped me to reconstruct the research questions. As a result of this pilot study, I feel that the general research question: *"What are the perceptions held by teachers and teacher assistants of their working relationship?"* is a valid one however, feedback received from the participants indicates that most thought the question should be re-worded to "What is the nature of the working relationship between teachers and educational assistants?" For most, the word "perception" was not necessary.

In relation to question # 3, #5, #9 #12

The questions that were constructed to guide the two sets of semi-structured interviews for the pilot study purposely included the word "relationship." The word was not defined for the participants prior to beginning the interview. The decision to include the word "relationship" in the formation of the question was made on the basis of the ambiguity in the research literature surrounding the meaning. I wanted to see what understanding or meaning the teachers and/or teachers' assistant had regarding this word. As these participant's response indicates, there was apparent confusion surrounding the intent of the meaning that these two participant's ascribed to the word:

> Researcher: "Can you tell me about your relationship with your
> teacher assistant and what it looks like?" (Question #3)

<div align="center">197</div>

Teacher: (Pause...) Okay, that question confuses me a little bit. Relationship, as in out...friends or, or...(um...) Relationship, I would say, my job is of course to give them instructions and lead them to what I need to have done with the students and to plan for them....Relationship...I would say we get along as friends as well as colleagues although we don't spend time after school hours with each other.

(Interview – Teacher #2)

Researcher: "Can you tell me about your relationship with the teacher and what it looks like?"

Teacher Assistant: "Relationship....hmm...(Pause...) What do you mean? How we get along? Do we like each other? Yes, we do but it's not like we are best friends or anything. Is that what you mean?

(Interview – Teacher Assistant #1)

This ambiguity was similar to what I had found in the research literature on teacher – teacher assistant working relationship and prompted has me to make a decision to define the term "relationship" for the actual research study.

In relation to elaboration and clarity

Interview questions elicit elaboration and clarifications from the participants. I found myself asking for more detail, hoping to discover exactly what the participant meant when analyzing a particular question. Upon reflection of the written transcript, I realize that there are several places where I could have asked the participant to elaborate:

Researcher: "How do you feel about the working relationship between you and the teacher you currently work with?"

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Teacher Assistant: "Great. I like it"

<div style="text-align:right">(Interview – Teacher Assistant #1)</div>

As the researcher, I could have asked for elaboration by asking:

Researcher: "Tell me what is great. Can you tell me about specific examples?"

This occurred in several other places within the first set of interviews

Researcher: " What do you expect from the teacher assistant you work with?"

Teacher: "I expect hard work. I expect honesty, (pause) (um…) and willingness to do whatever we need them to do in the classroom."

With more probing for detail, this question could have been rephrased as: *"Can you tell me what you mean by honesty?"*

A significant amount of the questions that will be used in the actual study focussed on the working relationship between the teacher and teacher assistant. All of the participants in this pilot study remarked in some way that careful handling of the information was going to be necessary because there is a chance the information could damage or hurt a participant's feelings.

In relation to recording procedures

As I conducted the interviews for the pilot study, I realized that there are some issues associated with the recording of the data while interviewing. I intended to take notes during each of the interviews. This was for a number of reasons. I was afraid that if, for some reason, the recording did not work, I would have some data and as well, I wanted to be able to make notes to myself about various responses.

<div style="text-align:center">199</div>

For the first interview with a teacher, I simply scribed various comments to myself as the interview was evolving. It was difficult, however, to go back and make sense of these scribblings after the interview. For the remaining interviews, I decided to develop an interview form, which I could then use for recording purposes. I used the general questions as a guide. These questions were located down the side of the page and I used the remainder of the page to jot any notes, which pertained directly to the interview (See Appendix C). I also included on this page, information regarding the purpose of the study, the issues surrounding confidentiality and the right to opt out. Even though I had provided each of my participants with a copy of my ethics review, having this information located right on my interview sheet encouraged me to review this information prior to beginning the interview. I found this form useful for the remaining interviews in that it allowed me to go back and make sense of my field notes.

Another issue that arose during the interviews is that I realized that I had not memorized the interview questions. I found that I would often lose eye contact with the participant because I was finding that I had to refer to my interview questions. Another issue associated with not having the interview questions memorized is that quite often a participant would not respond to the question that I just asked but instead responded to a question that was to be forthcoming. Instead of jotting the answer to that question on the sheet at that moment, I found myself re-asking the question later on in the interview and the participant looking rather strangely at me!

I was struck by the amount of data that I gathered during this pilot study. Even though some of the participants only had one interview, I found myself with volumes of data. The actual time for transcribing was approximately 2-3 hours for every hour of audiotape. In addition, my field notes, because of the format I initially used were difficult for me to go back and make sense of. On one of the interviews, U did not use a new audiotape and the quality of that recording was not the best. I the actual study, I will ensure that only new tapes are used.

In relation to ethical issues

During my second interview with one of the teacher assistants, she shared some information that she indicated was "off the record." I must admit that I didn't

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quite know how to deal with this right at the time. I indicated that we could turn off the tape recorder but she responded that this was not necessary. I then indicated that since this was a pilot study, intended to look primarily at the interview questions and not at the answers to the questions themselves, that the actual responses to the questions was not going to be analyzed but only the comments regarding the questions. This was fine, however, it did remind me that in my actual study that I may come upon a participant that indicates that some of the information he/she is willing to share may not be included in the study. As a researcher, this is fine with me. Even after supplying a transcript of an interview to a participant, if they indicated that they wish to make changes, this is fine. In fact, that is one of the major reasons for returning the transcript. I want to ensure that I have "captured" the true meaning for that participant.

In relation to my reflective notes

After each interview, I went immediately back to my field notes to add detail to any of my thoughts that I had been writing. The reason for doing this as soon as I could was that I was certain if I left it, many of my thoughts might be lost. I would then play the tape a couple of times while reading my descriptive notes. This helped me in that reflective aspect as I attempted to make sense of the information I was hearing.

In relation to the role of the researcher

Part of my intent in undertaking a pilot study was to gather data about the process and about myself as researcher. Rallis and Rossman (1998) observe that just as you gather and observe data, you should also record data about your own research activities and their development. Questions that I considered were what did I observe during the interview process? What questions did I ask and why? What changes in the research design will I make as a result of this pilot study? What problems or issues did I encounter? How will my stance as a principal and a researcher shape this study?

Denzin & Lincoln (1998) observe that the way in which an interviewer acts, questions and responds during an interview shapes the relationship and therefore, the

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ways in which a participant may choose to respond and give accounts of their experience.

During this pilot study, I learned that interviews must be good listeners and deeply interested in what others have to say. Even a deep interest in the topic and a desire to learn more about the topic from my participants was difficult at times. I now realize that although I had often engaged in certain forms of interviewing, this new role of researcher was somehow very different. In order to undertake a research study, which involves interviewing as a means of data collection, it was necessary for me to become more proficient in personal interaction, question framing and gentle probing for elaboration. During my first set of interviews during this pilot study, I quickly realized that I had volumes of data related to the topic, that if I had been doing the actual study instead of the pilot study which was focussing on the questions themselves, it would have been time-consuming to analyze.

In relation to further questions

During the first set of interviews, not one of the participants offered a suggestion on another possible question for the study. Once the transcripts were returned and the second set of interviews were held, there were a number of suggestions made. These included:

- Do you have any special training for working with students in an inclusive classroom?
- Do you enjoy working in an inclusive classroom?
- (For teachers) Have you ever refused to work with a teacher assistant? Why?

Summary

This pilot study has influenced the development of the general and specific research questions and the development of interview guides for my research study. It will also influence the selection of approaches and techniques for data collection and data analysis for the actual study. In response to the data and as a result of discussions with "critical fiends," I have changed the focus of the general research question to reflect the following: *"What is the nature of the working relationship between teachers and teacher assistants."* In the research proposal, the general research question will reflect a stronger emphasis on the definition of the term "working

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relationship." In addition, I have decided to include the additional questions that were suggested but I have also decided to "cluster" the questions in order that there are approximately six general questions instead of the original fourteen questions that were used for this pilot study.

I have learned a lot about myself as a researcher and about the nature of research by engaging in this pilot study. It has been a worthwhile endeavor for me in that it will inform my practice in my dissertation work. I am grateful to the teachers and teacher assistants who saw the value in this pilot study and who agreed to participate. Without them, I would not have been able to complete the study.

In summary, conducting this pilot study has demonstrated that my research topic is valid, that there is a desire from teachers and teacher assistants that their working relationship be explored and that they feel that the findings would inform the field of education.

Pilot Study - Attachments

January 2002

Re: Pilot Study

I am an Ed.D student in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta. I am conducting a pilot study entitled "Exploring the Working Relationship between Teachers and Teacher Assistants. The purpose of this study is to examine the working relationship that exists between teachers and teacher assistants. Working relationship is defined as your daily practice with each other as you implement programs for students with special needs. I am interested in understanding what your practice together looks like. I would like to further explore what are the positive aspects to your work together as well as any issues that might make it difficult to sustain a working relationship.

I would like to invite you to participate in this pilot study. The project will run from February 2002 - May 2002. If you choose to participate in this pilot study, you will be interviewed twice during this time. During these sessions, notes will be taken in addition to the interview being tape-recorded. You do not have to answer any question you don't want to and you will have an opportunity to review the transcripts of your interviews. At that time, you may make any additions or deletions that you wish. In the pilot study report, your anonymity is assured by the use of a pseudonym.

The approved Ethics Review for this pilot study is attached. There are several ethical issues that you need to be aware of. Your participation is voluntary and you may opt out of the study at any time. All information collected during the pilot study will be considered confidential and only shared with my academic advisor.

Please feel free to telephone me at 430-6236 if you have any questions regarding this pilot study. If you agree to participate, arrangements will be made to meet with you and explain the study in greater detail and to obtain your written consent.

Thank you for taking the time to consider the information in this letter. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Linda Schnell
Doctoral Student
Department of Elementary Education
University of Alberta

Consent Form – Pilot Study
Teacher /Teacher Assistant

I understand that Linda Schnell, under the direction of Dr. Robert Jackson of the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta, is conducting a pilot study to look at the working relationship between teachers and teacher assistants.

I understand that participation in the study is purely voluntary and is my own decision.

I understand that I will be interviewed twice and that these interviews will be transcribed.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

I have discussed the above information with Linda Schnell and she has agreed to answer any questions I may have concerning this study.

I understand that I can ask questions of the researcher and her advisor at any time.

_____

Signature of Participant

_____

Date

Interview Question	Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes
1. What would a typical day look like For you and the teacher assistant (teacher)?		
2. How much time do you spend discussing role expectations with the teacher/teacher assistant?		
3. Tell me about your working relationship together.		
4. Tell me about the training you have received for working together.		
5. What do you see as important when thinking about your work together?		
6. What do you see as positive aspects of your relationship and what do you see as obstacles to your work together?		

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Pilot Study- Interview Guide
Attachment "A"

Interview Question	Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes
7. What are your expectations of the teacher/ teacher assistant you work with?		
8. How are conflicts handled?		
9. How do the students perceive your roles?		
10. What information could you give to teachers/teacher assistants about working together?		

APPENDIX II
Sample Letter to Participants
Teacher/Teacher Assistant Participation Consent Form

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October 1, 2002

To: Potential Participants

From: Linda Schnell
       Doctoral Student – Department of Elementary Education
       University of Alberta

Re: **Research Study: Teachers and Teacher Assistants: Exploring the
       Meanings of Their Working Relationship**

My name is Linda Schnell. I am a teacher and school administrator in another school district who is currently working on a doctoral degree at the University of Alberta in the Department of Elementary Education. I have completed all of the required course requirements of the degree and have recently passed my oral candidacy exam. I am now ready to begin the process of collecting and analyzing data, which will form the basis of my doctoral dissertation. The findings of this research study may also be used in future presentations or articles written by the researcher. I would like to take this opportunity to invite you, as a teacher or a teacher assistant to participate in this research study.

The title of my proposed research study is **Teachers and Teacher Assistants: Exploring the Meanings of Their Working Relationships.** Throughout my career as a teacher and a school administrator I have always understood the importance of the work of teachers and teacher assistants as they work together in inclusive settings. There is very little research in the area of understanding the meanings of teachers and teacher assistants' work as they work together to try and meet students' educational needs. I believe that this type of inquiry has the potential to inform teacher and teacher assistant understanding and practice. It is my hope that many aspects of the study will resonate with teachers and teacher assistants who are currently working in the field and with pre-service teachers and teacher assistants who are entering the field.

This is a multiple case study, which means that there is more than one school site that is involved. In this study, data from two schools will be collected. In each site, a teacher and a teacher assistant who work together will be selected. Each individual participant will be interviewed on two occasions and there will be one joint interview. Each interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. These interviews will be audio recorded and the transcripts will be returned to the participants for editing and clarification prior to being used in the study. The researcher also requests permission to conduct classroom observations. This would involve informal visits every three to four weeks during the period of November 2002-February 2003. These visits would be at the convience of the participants and would be approximately one hour in length.

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Teacher/Teacher Assistant Participation Consent Form

Research Study:

> **Teachers and Teacher Assistants: Exploring the Meanings of their Working Relationship**

I _____, hereby consent to participate in the above named research study. I understand that I will be interviewed and observed in a classroom setting in order that my perceptions of how teachers and teacher assistants work together in classrooms can be understood. The interviews will be audio recorded and conducted by Linda Schnell, a doctoral student in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta. All classroom observations will be conducted by Linda Schnell. All transcripts of any interview or observation will be returned to me for checking and clarification prior to being used in the actual dissertation.

Time commitment involved:

- Researcher would ask that she conduct at least two formal interviews with the participants. This would involve a time commitment of approximately 30 –45 minutes each time. Transcripts from these interviews would be returned to allow for additions, deletions or clarification to occur.
- Over the period of November 2002 to February 2003, the researcher would ask that she can make visits to the classroom setting to observe teacher-teacher assistant work and interaction. The number of visits would be dependent on the participant's schedule. (Ideally, one visit approximately every 2-3 weeks)

I further understand that:

- The Superintendent of Schools, for my school district is aware of the proposed research and has given his approval for the researcher to approach potential school sites and participants. He has indicated that any potential participation must be voluntary.
- Although my principal has indicated to the researcher that he/she would permit research to be conducted in the school, he/she has no expectation for me to be involved in this study.
- I may withdraw from this study at any time, without penalty or any kind of repercussion.
- All research data gathered will be treated confidentially and discussed only with the researcher and her academic supervisor. No data will be shared with any member of my school district.
- Neither my school nor I will be identifiable in any of the documents or publications resulting from this study.

- Any information or data will be kept in a secure location for a period of five years after the study. All identifying information will be replaced by pseudonyms.

Signature :   _____

Date: _____

(Two copies provided – one for the participant and one for the researcher)

**Appendix III
Interview Guide**

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First Interview Guide

1. How long have you been working together?

2. Have you worked previously with a teacher/teacher assistant? Tell me about these experiences.

3. What is your philosophy regarding inclusive education?

4. How are the needs of students with special needs met in the classroom?

5. What do you see as the perceived benefits for the students when the two of you work together in the classroom?

6. Describe your role in the classroom.

7. Is this role different than the role of the teacher/teacher assistant?

8. Describe the working relationship between yourself and the teacher/teacher assistant.

9. What do the terms teamwork and collaboration mean to you?

10. What skills or characteristics are necessary for you and the teacher/teacher assistant to work together?

11. How are decisions made in the classroom?

12. How do you and the teacher assistant communicate about what you do together?

13. How important is trust in a working relationship?

14. What behaviors are most important in a working relationship?

15. What is the greatest challenge in a working relationship?