

By Jeanine Nistler

Twenty-six fifth-graders stood, with right hands over their hearts, reciting the "Pledge of Allegiance."

They listened to a quick reading of the day's hot lunch menu and eagerly responded when student teacher Katrina Hemenway asked what they had worked on while she had been away for a couple of days.

Later, Hemenway quickly moved from one student to another as the class worked on an assignment, then she gathered a half-dozen children around a table for a small-group session.



Aside from the laptop computers on a few students' desks, this could be any elementary classroom of the '60s, '70s or '80s. It is a timeless scene except for one invisible — but significant — difference.

This is an "inclusive" classroom at Lindbergh Elementary School in Little Falls. A number of SCSU College of Education students spent a portion of Fall Quarter there in field experiences for the Inclusive Teacher Education Project (ITEP), an experimental program that combines regular elementary and special education training.

ITEP was created to prepare teachers for a diverse classroom.

Most teacher training programs have not equipped general education teachers to meet the needs of special education students, even though studies have shown that 95 percent of the state's special education students spend at least a portion of each school day in classrooms with general education students. ITEP participants learn to teach all students, regardless of their academic, social, physical or

emotional needs.

"Inclusion is happening in Minnesota schools. We felt we really needed to respond in preparing teachers," said Nancy Bacharach, a professor in SCSU's teacher development department, who with special education professor Janet Salk directs ITEP.

"Inclusive" means different things in different schools. At Lindbergh Elementary, it means that talented and gifted children work alongside those with emotional/behavioral disorders and those with physical or health impairments. It means that "everyone is on the same playing field," Hemenway said.

In this type of inclusive setting, children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder are not lined up for their doses of Ritalin. Youngsters with emotional disorders are not segregated in a special classroom. Students with severe physical impairments are not separated from their classmates unless they require special medical attention that cannot be provided in the classroom.

"The kids are blended so well, they don't know" who has special needs, said Kent Gomez, the teacher who worked with Hemenway for several weeks this fall.

ITEP has drawn the attention of educators around the country. Faculty from universities in Michigan, Nebraska and Wisconsin have visited SCSU to learn more about the project. Educators from countless other states have requested written information. SCSU faculty involved in ITEP have made presentations at conferences around the state and nation; and in October, several ITEP students themselves presented a program at a state conference on higher order thinking.

ITEP began in 1994 with no outside funding after an SCSU survey found that general education graduates felt ill-prepared for working with special education students, and both a faculty group and an external advisory committee stressed the need for that sort of training. Soon,

financial support began to roll in.

Federal funding came via a \$10,000 Kansas Consortium grant and a three-year Funds for Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) grant totaling \$234,000. This fall FIPSE renewed the grant, approving \$74,569 for the current academic year. SCSU faculty improvement grants have totaled \$8,800; Q-7 grants, \$19,000; and Minnesota Office of Special Education grants, \$55,750.

ITEP proponents are quick to explain that inclusion is not a way to cut costs and "we're not trying to replace the special education teacher," Bacharach said. "Their role becomes different. They work within the classroom. Rather than pulling students out, they work with the classroom teacher. ... What we're looking at is, 'What's best for the kids?' "

Both special and general education students benefit from inclusion, she said, adding that studies have indicated that academic achievement remains constant or improves for both groups when they work together.

Before ITEP, students could earn dual licensure in elementary education and a specific learning disability via a five-year program within the College of Education. What sets ITEP apart is its blending of the teachers, students and field experiences of the general and special education departments. When ITEP students graduate, they are licensed to teach general elementary classes as well as children with specific learning disabilities.

The project's three major components are:

- * Team teaching. Professors from general elementary and special education team-teach some of the courses because Salk and Bacharach believe it is important to model the sort of collaboration they expect of their students when they become teachers.

- * Grouping students in a cohort for their junior and senior years. This allows the students to be part of a learning community, to develop strong bonds with their peers.

* Varied field experiences. ITEP students work in regular, special education and inclusive classrooms.

The College of Education did not start a third cohort because SCSU will be switching to a semester system in 1988 and the state Board of Teaching is changing the licensing structure. Also, the college wants to evaluate the project before determining whether to seek "permanent" status. As part of their efforts to monitor the project's effectiveness, professors have kept in touch with the Cohort 1 graduates. Their feedback, Bacharach said, has been extremely positive.

"They feel they have been very well prepared for the realities of the workplace."

sidebar

The SCSU students who participate in the Inclusive Teacher Education Project (ITEP) represent a select group.

Applicants competed for spots in the cohort on the basis of their grade-point averages (2.75 or better), attitudes, writing skills, completion of general education requirements and answers to open-ended questions about why they wished to participate. In selecting ITEP participants, the College of Education aimed for racial and gender diversity; the groups have been representative of the overall SCSU student body, said Nancy Bacharach, one of ITEP's co-directors.

The first cohort of 27 ITEP students graduated in the spring of 1996. The 24-member second cohort will graduate at the end of this coming spring quarter.

Students commit to coursework and field experiences that run from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday, and to a Monday-night class. "It's awfully demanding on students," Bacharach said. "It was a huge commitment for students to make."

ITEP participant Susan Scheer agrees. The program's intensity "can be very overwhelming," she said. "You're really immersed in your training." But that immersion, she said, leads to tremendous rewards.

The program's benefits, she said, are "getting more than one perspective" on general and special education and becoming prepared to "better collaborate with other teachers." And, Scheer said, ITEP graduates are prepared to be "change agents," to encourage a team approach to inclusive education in the elementary schools where they get jobs.