

Case Study

“Anna”

Female with autism, 11 years

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Planning for Inclusive Education for An Individual Student

Anna is 11 years old. She is tall, slender and very graceful for her young age. She is quiet, poised and pleasant. Anna at first appears to be shy and seldom makes eye contact upon first encounters with new people that she meets. Anna has been diagnosed with Autism.

Anna attends a public elementary school. Within the school are the self-contained autism classrooms of her community. There are 5 children in her room. Three of the students are mainstreamed, while the remaining two, Anna being one of them, are kept within the self-contained room. Anna and the other student are mainstreamed into choir, gym and lunch. They have a table at which the five students sit together to eat. Basically, it is a segregated lunch table within a general education lunchroom.

Within their classroom, these same five students sit at individual, separate desks but have a round table for “group” work. Often, Anna will, initially, balk at joining the group. She is used to spending much time alone working independently.

The school district is segregated. Each school houses a different type of disability. Those with mental impairment go to one school. Those with autism are housed at another school. If someone with Autism lives on the west side of the district but the Autism classes are on the east side, then the students are bused across the district. This district is one of the few districts that do not provide busing for their general education students. Busing is the bone that is tossed to parents to pacify them while their children are segregated across district. Luckily for Anna, she currently lives directly across the street from the elementary school that houses the Autism classes for her age range. Next year, as she moves onto middle school, she will be bused.

Anna has received her education in a self-contained classroom throughout her school life. She has a wonderful memory and an appreciation for music with very distinct tastes in her music. She has an attraction to comfortable situations and things. For instance, she loves to cuddle, wrapped up in a soft blanket. She has a great love of things and people along with a strong sense of family. Anna can name every relative in her photo albums and routinely visits her relatives in India. She loves to travel and has a strong love of the water. She loves to be in the water but unfortunately had a very poor experience with a swim instructor who had questionable teaching methods. Her mother hopes she will be able to one day develop enough of a trust in someone who might teach her to swim. She is strong physically, and has a good throwing arm. Her mother feels she would be excellent in a sport such as softball.

Anna also has a very dry sense of humor and loves to playfully interact with people she is comfortable with. She speaks English and understands two dialects of

Indian. She will occasionally both speak and write words in these dialects. Anna loves swings and roller coasters. She even went to Disney and begged to go on the Magnum Force as well as Splash Mountain numerous times.

She dislikes small, dark, close places and objects strongly to the sound of steam such as in a teapot or a pressure cooker. She also has a fear of large animals. There are no pets in their home.

Anna is a strong reader and loves math. She loves to work on the computer and has recently, due to her mother, learned to use the search engine on the computer. She is given subjects, daily, to look up and has been delighted in the results.

Anna's most immediate stronghold of support is her family. Both her mother and father work very hard to give their daughter the best opportunities possible. Though I have never spoken much to her father, he is very often wherever his daughter is to be found. As for her mother, she is a woman of great strength. She is an ideal role model, loving mother, wife and advocate. Anna's mother is a strong communicator who seems to work diligently on being objective in her approaches to Anna. In observing her with Anna, I witnessed both her affection and understanding of what have been most effective instructional strategies. Anna's mother, whom I will refer to her as Sue, is very gracious and appreciative of anyone who truly tries with her daughter. She has a marvelous sense of humor and an almost poetic gift of the manner in which she chooses her words. (See the attached speech from the CEC seminar at Wayne State University, 2002)

Sue's understanding of Anna is touching, intuitive but always with an acceptance of the challenges involved in raising a child with a disability. Sue does not look at the disability, but rather seeks the abilities and tends to focus on them. She said to me "Anna is not a hamster. I don't want her to be caged, fed lettuce and then sent home." Poetic? Sure is, but the underlying message is deeper. What more than caged hamsters are our children in self contained classrooms?

Sue realizes that the process of educating her daughter is not always easy, nor enjoyable. "Anna does not always understand nor cooperate. She has to be dragged kicking and screaming to where she wants to go. "She must be allowed to try things that may or may not be right. This requires self-esteem." Sue told me "one must keep a sense of humor when dealing with Anna's behaviors. The only real challenge is when Anna and I are having a behavior at the same time." This parent truly understands the psychology behind raising her child. She wants to work with others as a team and is very willing to allow others to try ANYTHING, within reason, to reach her child.

We discussed the idea of inclusion for Anna. Though Sue is not against it, she is concerned that Anna will not be protected and, consequently, made fun of. She does understand that there are "certain lessons that only peers can teach." She definitely realizes that Anna needs time with peers, in social situations and developing friendships.

When I found out that the teacher had only 5 students, three of which were mainstreamed a considerable amount of time, and had two aides, my impression was that this would leave some good quality time for intensive one on one for each student. The aides would accompany the other students to their classes and therefore were not available. Still, this left a teacher with only two students. Unfortunately, it was explained to me that the teacher uses this for planning time, conferences, staff meetings and paperwork. The time that was left was available for teaching.

I asked Sue about the instructional strategies used in the classroom. Her comment was “they were limited.” She apparently had to become quite forceful in insisting that Anna not spend anymore time coloring by number. Sue wants Anna to work on academics. After all, she is in school and will be at the same age as her fifth grade peers. I doubt much time is spent coloring by number in the general education curriculum.

Sue has asked the teacher to use a lot of social stories, written communication and advance notice of what the schedule will be. She has also asked the teacher to document antecedents to unacceptable behavior. Sue also says that Anna tends to “recycle old memories and replay them exactly like watching an old movie.” She explained that this takes place instead of typical two way conversation when one might say “Remember when... ” or “You know what happened when...” Or “I felt upset when.... .” At these points, Anna does not necessarily need to be responded to as much as redirected. She needs to learn to focus on her work, as any student would and not have a teacher who gets sidetracked by her conversation.

Anna’s social worker brings other students into her classroom for “reversed mainstreaming.” She also accompanies Anna to Gym and makes sure that Anna goes with one of the two “friends.” Sue says she is unsure of how much facilitating of actual communication the social worker is able to do, despite her being as well meaning as she is.

Anna has also been seeing an occupational therapist. Sue claims that she has made tremendous progress with Anna. Unfortunately, the therapist has now been moved to consult status only. The system claims she has taken Anna as far as she is able to. My feeling is that she could do more. This seems to contradict the “continuum of services” that are to be available to students.

Anna is pulled out for speech and her mother feels the speech language pathologist’s teaching methods do not serve Anna’s needs. Sue has even tried to give her many, many strategies, reading materials and books to no avail. Sue, as usual, comes through, tongue in cheek, “The good thing is that she appears extremely sincere.” Apparently there was another speech therapist who worked with her in the past, but Sue found her also to be ineffective. She wanted Anna to “sing” her sentences. Imagine what late elementary school students would think of someone who always sang when they spoke. Sue’s response to the therapist was “I said something to the effect that we don’t normally conduct conversation in the manner of La Traviata.” It is wonderful that Sue is able to maintain her sense of humor. I am not sure I would be so successful, given the same situation.

Anna is more than just a concrete learner. She has good intelligence and benefits from being exposed to situations. Socially, she does well as long as she feels secure. She recently accompanied her mother to a seminar at Wayne State and spent several hours away from her parents, happily, interacting with several education majors. She behaved in an exemplary manner.

She is strong in math yet continues to do, at best, first and second grade work in school. She has not been introduced to work of her grade level such as multiplication. About two months before the end of the school year, her mother started to write down the times tables for two. She wrote $2 \times 2 = 4$, $2 \times 3 = 6$, and $2 \times 4 = 8$. At this point, Anna shoved her mother aside and wrote the remaining tables up to 100. When Anna’s teacher was shown this, her remark was “I don’t think I would have ever thought to introduce her

to this.” Unfortunately, the teacher did not ever present the material or work on further development of it.

Anna is a child who can read, write, loves math and understands three languages. This is not a girl who is incapable of learning. She also needs social interactions. She has many strengths that quite simply are being ignored in her current situation. An inclusive environment that is nurturing and supportive would be ideal for her. Supports, including an occupational therapist, social worker and speech therapist working along side Anna within the classroom would help with the adjustments necessary to help her settle comfortably into her new environment. Sue is definitely a mother who does not smother but is very willing to allow the professionals to do their job. The important part is that they do just that.

My daughter used to attend a private middle school. After moving to the public high school, I asked her what her observations were about the two schools. Her comment was amazingly insightful. “At the old school, the teachers taught because they loved to teach. Here, (at the new school) they teach because it’s their job.” I vowed, at that moment, to never allow ANYTHING to become just a job where I could not work with a passion for what I do.

Working with peers, I feel Anna would thrive. She desperately needs to establish friendships and working relationships with other children her age. She is most definitely capable of this and very much enjoys other people and the interactions involved. Once the children were comfortable with her disability, I think they would really enjoy her humor and disposition.

She also should have the opportunity to pursue a sport. If softball is an interest, then she should be allowed to be involved in order to both be a part of a team as well as for the social benefits.

A teacher who would model compassion, humor, flexibility and a positive attitude would help not only Anna, but also her classmates with the transition. The emotional stability in the end, must certainly, at the beginning, be the goal. If the teacher and supporting staff are able to use the previously mentioned principles as the cornerstone of their teaching philosophy, then success is guaranteed.