

A Choice Project

**Interviews,
Observations of a Special Needs Student,
and Analysis of Information
as it Relates to the Author
as an Educator and Human Being**

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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to report on what I have seen and heard observing a second child with special needs, and briefly comparing what I found with what I saw observing the first child with special needs I previously observed. Additionally, some of my own personal background information is provided for the reader, as it relates to my history as a student at the school in which I observed the two children, feeling that I was special in my own way. In this project I strove to further my goals of understanding how teachers can better educate students with special needs, by my closely observing special needs students, and interviewing the adults who work with these children. Through my observations and interviews, I hope to give educators not familiar with educating students with special needs some sort of basic idea of what the educational life of a student with disabilities entails. I also hope the information inspires, within the hearts of educators, the moral obligation they have to fully accept students with special needs, beyond their legal obligation.

The names of every person in the body of the paper are changed to protect the identity and privacy of all.

A Choice Project of Interviews, Observations of a Special Needs Student, and Analysis of the Information as it Relates to the Author as an Educator and Human Being

Lana A. Panagoulia

Introduction

“Lauren” Elementary, as I will call it in this paper for the purposes of protecting the privacy of the individuals I observed and interviewed, is a very special school to me. It is the elementary school I attended, and the place where I was first exposed to the English language. When I attended Lauren Elementary over 20 years ago, most of the students attending were white Anglo-Saxon, and I was very much considered a minority. I clearly remember that students with special needs were placed in a self-contained classroom down the hallway from my kindergarten classroom, and I remember in my five-year-old little mind, quite honestly, how scared I was of a few of these children. Later on, specifically when I was a graduate student in education, I was to discover that the only reason I felt fear, is because I didn’t understand—somewhat like I hadn’t been understood as a non-native English speaker.

Today, the student profile of Lauren’s students reflects the growing diversity in Southwest Ann Arbor. Another major change is that students with special needs are no longer put in a self-contained room, and they are not bused from far away areas as was previously done. According to the school’s principal, most all of the special needs students in Ann Arbor now attend their neighborhood schools.

I always felt different, and out of place as I was growing up. Sometimes my differences appeared ominous, as I occasionally inconvenienced adults who belonged to the archaic set of melting pot educators. I always felt like an outsider trying to get in. I imagine that I felt a lot like, but not nearly as much an outsider as those special needs students sequestered in a “convenient” corner of the school.

I’m not a teacher with a major in “special education”, so I didn’t know much about students with special needs before I took Dr. Peterson’s special education class this semester. But through my in depth observations of two students with special needs, and my interviews with 10 people who deal with special needs students on a frequent basis, I have developed quite an interesting base of experiences and knowledge.

In this project, I plan to report on what I saw and heard on my journey this semester as I educated myself on the inclusion process in the school in which I grew up. I will focus more on the second child I observed, which I will call “Ricki”, since I’ve already focused and discussed my observations of the first child I observed, which I called “Eric”, in my previous research. I have personalized this project, by interspersing a few of my own experiences in Lauren Elementary as a child, and at the high school that I attended in the same school district, with what I have learned this semester. Although not labeled a special needs student by the educational establishment, I believe I am special in my own ways, and struggled in similar ways in which many students have who are not “regular”. Similarly, I have grown to believe all students are special, and that educators should work towards personalizing education much more, so that every student’s strengths and weaknesses can be addressed. I believe this piece of work needed to be done because I feel it provides some sort of basic foundation for educators who haven’t ever worked with a special needs student, and want an idea of what to expect. I also

believe it provides information on important issues and opinions that professionals, and one family member, have voiced, through my interviews.

My Background Information Related to Lauren Elementary

Being the chunky, clumsy, shy, yet goofy-when-comfortable ethnic kid I was, who didn't know a word of English when I started school, I never seemed to fit in. I remember being tested as a child, and I remember not understanding what I was doing in a room away from the other kids, with a lady I had never seen before, let alone could not understand. How could my parents have done this? Send me to school, feeling so out of place like an uninvited gypsy popping into Buckingham palace for tea. The feelings I had all throughout my experiences at Lauren Elementary went from, "When would I go home?" "When would I understand?" "When would they understand me?" "When would I fit in?"

On the first day of school I got into a fight on the playground, when two, soon-to-be-popular-during-prepubescent-later-years, blond, pigtailed girls offensively mimicked the language I spoke. I had no means to communicate what I needed to communicate, so I did what any healthy kid would do—I grabbed a hold of one of each girl's pigtails, and proceeded to "exercise my right to free speech", in the only way I could. To make a long story short, mama was called in to hear the comments of a horrified teacher. Mama stuck up for me—she let my teacher know I was special, and that one day I would become even more special by learning more foreign languages than my own. Surely enough, I did.

I was a special student from the start. There is no doubt about it. Looking back on my experiences, I believe I felt similarly to what a lot of English-as-a-second-language children, minority children, and/or children with special education labels probably feel. It is because of this reason, knowing from first hand experience, that I believe all children are special, and even when they look like they "fit in", there is always something special about them that makes them unique. As an educator I strongly believe all of our students' differences should be addressed, whether they are cultural, religious, or ability related. By properly capitalizing on those differences we make learning more meaningful and interesting in our classrooms. I believe my experiences have made me become sensitive to the issues surrounding all children who are labeled and not labeled, and as I observed two children who were labeled, I saw my fears, passions, and struggles in both children.

Interesting, as it relates to this project, the teacher of the child whom I observed for this project, was once my 5th and 6th grade teacher, and I have very fond memories of him trying to help me in my quest to "Fit in".

Recent Background Information of Lauren Elementary

The school is located in a middle class area of Ann Arbor, and the socio-economic status of the families of students attending ranges from a low to an upper socio-economic status. There are students who are bused to the school each day from neighborhoods that are not further than a 10-15 minute driving distance. According to the principal, ethnic groups that make up the school population include African American, Asian, Native American, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, European and there are some biracial and bilingual students. When I attended Lauren Elementary, I remember there being only one African American regular education student, and several others in the "Special Ed Room".

Currently at Lauren Elementary, there are three students in the school who have an

I. E. P., and all are in an inclusionary setting. One of the children, “Eric”, who is the child I observed for the previous assignment has autism, with his teacher believing he may also be E. I., another has A. D. H. D., and is also E. I., and the third child, the second one I observed who will be discussed at more length in this paper, is P. O. H. I., with Down’s Syndrome.

The classroom I observed is composed of 19, fifth-grade children, including the child with special needs I observed, and the class is divided almost evenly between boys and girls. There are four ethnic groups (Caucasian, Asian, African American, and Hispanic) represented in the classroom profile.

The student being mainstreamed that I observed shall henceforth be referred to as “Ricki”. He is the second child of three children in the family, with a brother who is 23, and a sister who is ten. Eric comes from a middle class, two-parent home, with both parents working outside the home. Unlike the first parent, whom the previous teacher warned me was very uncooperative, Ricki’s parents, and in particular, his mother, was very cooperative, and thrilled with the idea that I wanted to learn about her son. I definitely felt a lot more comfortable, and I believe this ultimately allowed me to be more at ease, and more able to ask the questions to which I really wanted an answer.

The teacher, who I’ll refer to as Mr. Schuler, informed me that Ricki’s mother was very cooperative, and that I wouldn’t have any problems interviewing her. When I met his mother, I found out, firsthand, that she was a very friendly person, who was thrilled with the fact that I wanted to educate myself, as a well-meaning educator. This sense of welcoming was very much unlike the uncomfortable sense I had from “Eric’s” mother who didn’t return my phone call, and called the district to complain about me. Ricki’s mom warmly agreed to an interview, and even invited my daughter and I over to her house for the interview.

On the first day of my assignment, I interviewed the school psychologist, “Jina Zannuck”. She seemed to be in a worried hurry, which I took to possibly mean she was scared about disclosing any information, even though the principal told her “It was okay to offer me an interview”.

On the second day of my assignment, I observed “Mr. Schuler’s” lesson, where I also introduced myself as one of Mr. Schuler’s former students. I felt very welcomed, as he invited me to help with the teaching, which I considered an honor. As I taught and observed, I experienced a justified sense of a déjà vu experience, as Mr. Schuler was my 5th and 6th grade teacher.

On the third day of my assignment, I interviewed Mr. Schuler during lunch, observed Mr. Schuler’s class for an entire afternoon, and I interviewed “Ms. Jackson”, the teacher assistant, after school. I also met Ricki’s mother, “Debbie Gibons”, and she gave me her phone and beeper numbers, so that I may arrange an interview with her.

On the fifth day of my assignment, I interviewed Ricki’s mother at her home. She invited my daughter to come along, and I felt very welcomed into her home, as we spent two hours asking and answering questions of each other.

On the sixth day of my assignment, I interviewed the superintendent of the school district, “Dr. Bill Murray”, at his office. He was very welcoming, and shed some light on my past as a student in the district as we discussed aspects of my past, and also informed me of his duties as superintendent.

Brief Description of the Class And Class Layout and Comparison to Mrs. Crane's Class

The desks in Mr. Schuler's classroom are not arranged in a symmetrical way around the room, with respect to form, but the arrangement does appear to be functional, as a pathway is made near the center of the room for the teacher and/or teaching assistant to more easily walk from the front of the room to the back (See Figure 1.). The arrangement of desks is very unlike Eric's 2nd grade classroom that I observed previously (See Figure 2.). When looking closer at the seemingly unorganized manner in which the desks are arranged in Mr. Schuler's classroom, one sees a functional justification for it. I believe the desks are arranged in the manner students and Mr. Schuler had agreed upon. Interestingly, this "unorthodox" organization of desks reflects Mr. Schuler's spontaneous, energetic, and seemingly capricious teaching style, which is so intriguing.

When one compares this organizational style to Mrs. Crane's classroom, one notes that the organization of the desks in neat groups of four reflects her very conventional, organized manner of teaching. In addition, her groupings look like she strove to create heterogeneous groups, Mr. Schuler's organization of desks looks like he allowed students to sit next to their friends, who interestingly, and quite predictably because of their approaching adolescence, happen to be friends that are the same-sex, and who appear to be of a similar ethnic background.

One interesting observation made is that the paraprofessional's desk in Eric's room is right next to his, while the paraprofessional's desk in Ricki's classroom is rather far away from Ricki's desk. I believe that one of the reasons Eric may be so dependent on his paraprofessional is because it seems she is always next to him; conversely, I believe Ricki may be so independent because his paraprofessional is quite often not next to him. Whether Ricki's paraprofessional makes a purposeful effort or not, she gives the visual impression to all that she is there to assist other students in the classroom as well.

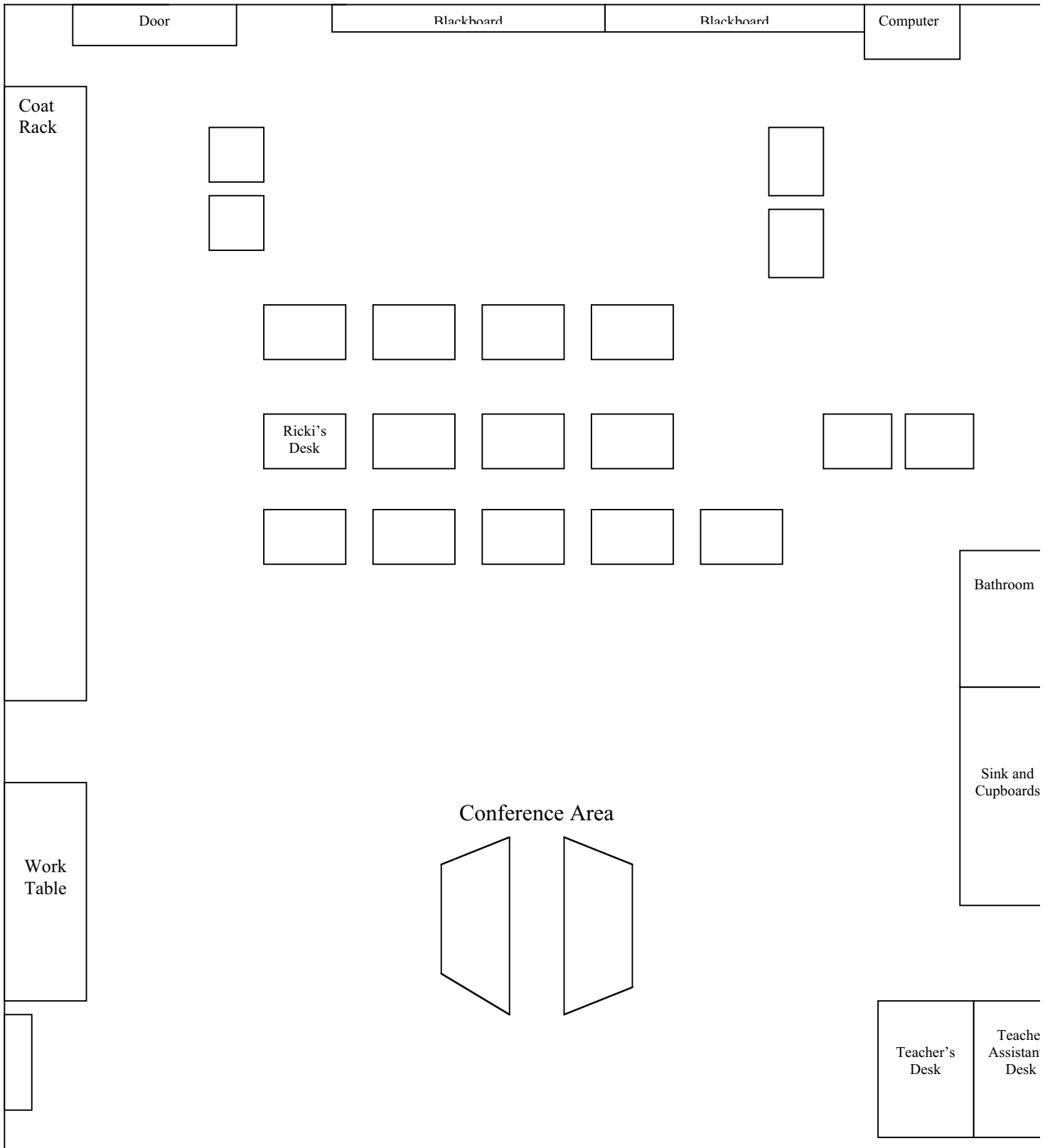
Interview and Observation Process

I received approval from the principal to observe Mr. Schuler's class the same day I had received approval for Mrs. Crane's class, on Friday, February 23rd. I popped in unexpectedly into Mr. Schuler's classroom, and he didn't recognize who I was. Feeling rather emotional that day, my hormones being in their once monthly rage, I told myself, "Okay Lana, you will not cry...Lana you just will not cry!" Mr. Schuler was a very special teacher to me. He was one of the most influential teachers in my life, even though he didn't know it prior to my recent visit. In his 2nd year of teaching, I was assigned as a student to Mr. Schuler in a combined class of two fifth grade classes. Full of passion to teach, and love of his students, I reaped all that he offered. He would come in on Saturdays to help students with their math, even though his veteran teaching partner did not, which was understandable, because she had a family. Mr. Schuler's family, I observed, was his students.

I knocked on the door to Mr. Schuler's classroom, which used to be the music room in my days at Lauren Elementary, and as I looked through the door's window, I noticed Mr. Schuler was on the phone. He motioned for me to come in. He held up his index finger, as to say, "I'll be just one minute", and continued his conversation.

Listening to his voice brought back so many memories. I bowed my head, closed my eyes, and fought the tears. I remembered the weekend camp trip our class took, where Mr.

Figure 1. Mr. Schuler's Classroom Layout



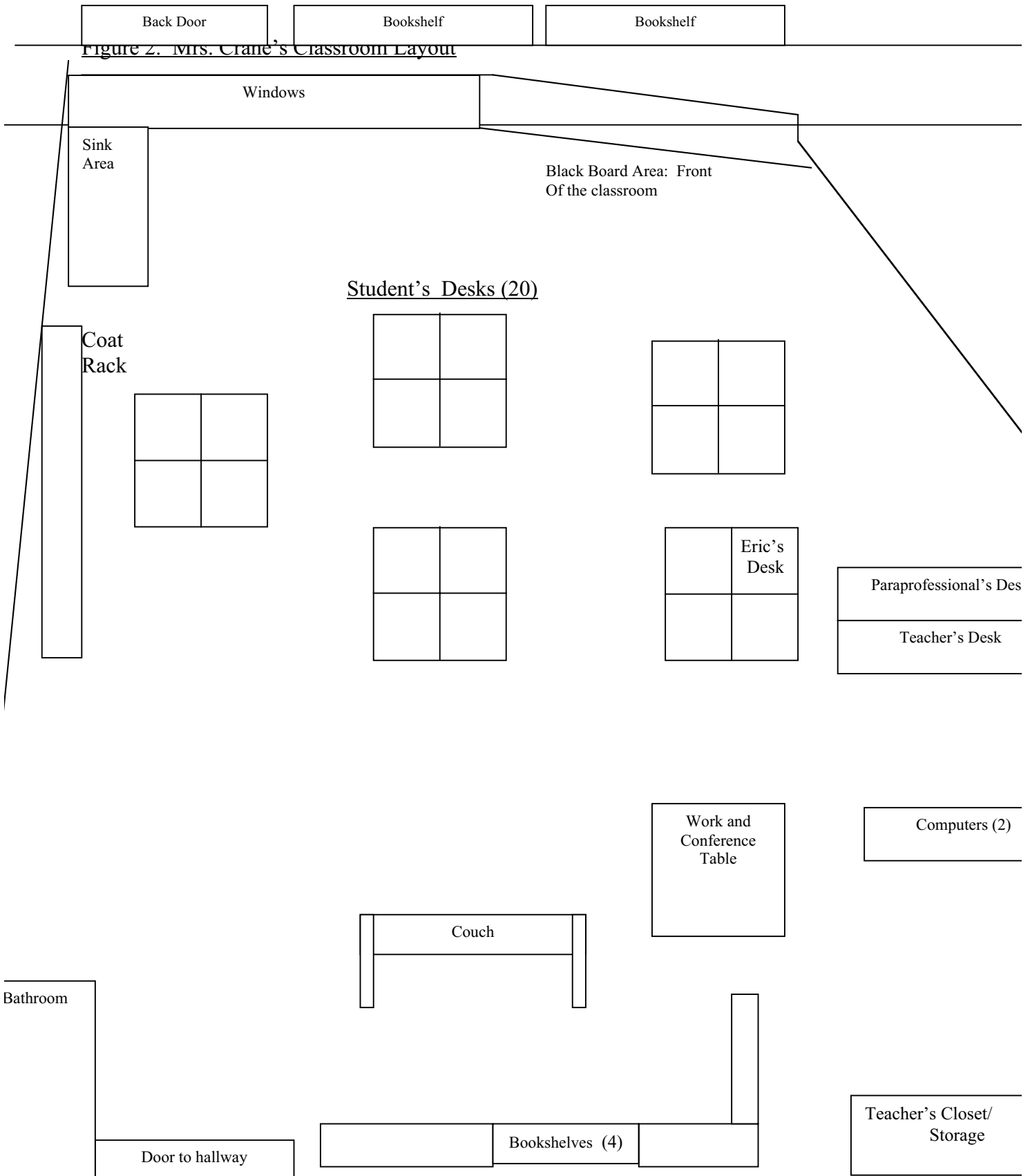


Figure 2. Mrs. Crane's Classroom Layout

Schuler won the “Toilet Bowl Award” for his cabin having the cleanest facilities, and his being “crowned” with a toilet seat placed over his head, and around his neck by the camp director. I laughed so hard then that my belly hurt, and now I was on the verge of crying. Mr. Schuler ended the conversation, and looked curiously at me.

“Mr. Schuler...Do you remember me?” I asked. Mr. Schuler looked like he had absolutely no idea of my identity. I didn’t speak for what seemed like a minute, holding onto the illusion, that it was possible for an elementary school teacher to remember a student he had over 20 years ago, hoping during the extra time, he would remember me.

“Well...I can’t say...”

“This is Lana...I mean, I am Lana, I was your student during the late seventies. Do you remember me? Mr. Schuler’s brows went from furrowed to a double rainbow arch.

“Oh yea...My goodness, how are you doing?” And there they came. The tears burst right out of the corners of my eyes, and poured out uncontrollably.

“You just don’t know how much you mean to me, or how strong an impact you’ve had on my life”, I wailed. Having flashbacks from my own student teaching, I remember trying to be a good teacher, and it helped when I remembered Mr. Schuler’s teaching style, and mimicked whatever I remembered of it...Boy did I wail!

Mr. Schuler was speechless. I felt very awkward, because he didn’t come over to give me a hug, as I would have wanted him to. I understood though very well, times had changed, and people don’t go around nowadays giving hugs, especially in such a politically correct town as Ann Arbor.

Mr. Schuler smiled. I felt like I had reaffirmed for him that all the hard work he had done really paid off, and that somebody was nice enough to come back and tell him so. He told me he still had a tee shirt with all his student’s names on it from my class, and smiling as I wiped my face I told him that I had kept my tee shirt also. He told me he was planning on wearing it when he retired, on his last day of school.

After Mr. Schuler agreed to my observing his classroom, and interviewing him, I left that day feeling like the little girl who walked out of his class for two years as a fifth and sixth grader. I walked home relishing the memories that came back to me, and tried to figure out if any of them had impacted me so much as to influence were I was today.

Observations and Interviews

The principal felt very much more at ease with my observing Ricki’s classroom, than she did with my observing Eric’s classroom. Ricki’s parents were more supportive of the school, and recommendations that the school made. I really reaped the rewards of that fact because Mr. Schuler, was in effect much more at ease than Mrs. Crane, and told me I could feel free to come in at any time of day that I needed to. He did suggest though, that for the days of the week that I planned to observe that I should observe during the afternoon, as his students had specials in the morning. Ricki is identified as being P. O. H. I., and has Down syndrome. During my interview with his mother, she revealed to me some of his other past and present health conditions, which include Hirschprung’s disease, where part of his colon wasn’t intervated, and abnormally didn’t have nerve endings. Additionally, as a young child, he had a colostomy for two years, during the early intervention part of his life, and infantile spasms, or ipsorhythmia, which caused seizures.

My first day of observations occurred on Thursday, March 8th, from 2:05 p. m. to 3:05 p.m., and my second day of observations was on Friday, March 9th, for the whole afternoon, from 12:30 p. m. to 3:30 p. m. I observed Ricki and his classmates during the periods of social studies, science, and recess.

My first interview for this second project was conducted on Thursday, March 8th, when I interviewed the school psychologist briefly, as she was in a hurry, from 3:30 p. m. to 3:45 p.m. The second interview was conducted on Friday, March 9th, from 11:30 a. m. to 12:15 p. m., with Mr. Schuler, my former teacher, and now, Ricki's teacher. The third interview was conducted with the paraprofessional assigned to Ricki's classroom, Diona Jackson, after school, from 3:45 p. m. to 4:45 p. m., on Friday, March 9th. The fourth interview was conducted in the home of Debbie Gibbons, Ricki's mother, on Sunday, March 11th, from 2:00 p. m. to 4:00 p. m. The fifth interview was conducted with Bill Murray, the superintendent of the school district, in his office from 10:15 a. m. to 12:15 p. m.

First Observation 2: 05 p.m. to 3:05 p.m.

Before entering the classroom for the first observation, I had arranged with Mr. Schuler to come in during a transition, because I didn't want to disrupt the flow of the class. Mr. Schuler agreed, even though he told me I could come visit at any time during the afternoon. There were 18 children in the classroom, including Ricki. When I entered the room, I went to sit directly in the back of the classroom, trying to be invisible, and the students didn't seem to notice me, as none of them turned around out of curiosity, except for Ricki. I took this behavior to mean that he was very aware of his surroundings and what goes on around him, and perhaps even more aware than some of his classmates.

The students were involved in what appeared to be a math activity, as they manipulated Aflix cubes, but I later found out they were designing and building their own city, as part of their social studies curriculum. I was taken aback when Mr. Schuler introduced me to the class. I told the class "They were very lucky to have 'Mr. Schuler' as a teacher, as he had been mine for two years when I attended 'Lauren Elementary', and I found him to be one of my best teachers."

Mr. Schuler then went on to explain the class assignment, where the students were to take cubes, and design their buildings using them. Ricki started to make a vocal, rhythmical moaning noise, and Mr. Schuler very inconspicuously asked him to stop, by saying "Ricki". Ricki stopped immediately. Mr. Schuler told the class he would be a building inspector, and that if I, Mrs. Panagoulia, wanted to, I could also be a building inspector. I enthusiastically agreed. As students were fiddling with their blocks, Mr. Schuler asked them to stop, so that they could listen to his directions. As Mr. Schuler continued to explain the assignment, Ricki started to rhythmically kick the chair in front of him, but no one seemed to be disturbed as he did so quietly. When a loud, squeaking noise was heard coming from the hallway, Ricki didn't seem to take notice, as he continued focusing his eyes on Mr. Schuler, while the majority of the class giggled.

Mr. Schuler asked the class if they had any questions, and several students, including Ricki, raised their hands. When a student walked into the classroom from the hallway, about half the class took notice, and looked at the student as he walked to his desk. Ricki remained focused on Mr. Schuler's question, as he continued to raise his hand, and look at the teacher.

The teacher assistant, "Ms. Jackson", walked up to Ricki's desk, placed a checklist in front of him, and whispered to him as she checked items off the list. Rick, wearing one tennis

shoe, walked to the bathroom, and stayed in there for around five minutes. In the meantime, Ms. Jackson took the list to Ricki's knapsack, and put it inside his bag. One could hear Ricki flush the toilet, and he came out of the bathroom, walked to the adjacent sink outside the bathroom and washed his hands. He dried his hands with a paper towel napkin and threw the towel away as Mr. Sculer continued to answer questions. Ricki, noticing this, raised his hand like some of the other students, as he sat at the edge of the sink for about five minutes, and then returned to his desk where the teacher assistant had placed some Fritos on a napkin on his desk, and he sat down.

Ricki licked the Fritos, but he didn't eat them until he first licked every Frito on the napkin, including his hands. The students around him didn't seem to notice this, as it seems that they are used to his eating behavior. The teacher assistant told me, "He loves Fritos...He'll eat Fritos, applesauce and yogurt everyday for lunch...He has problems with his stomach, and that's all that he wants to eat." Interestingly, I later read in the book Down syndrome: A promising future, together, a book which "Debbie Gibbons", Ricki's mother, lent me, that in many cases, children with Down syndrome regularly prefer to eat only certain foods (Hassold, & Patterson, 1999).

As Ricki ate, Mr. Schuler asked the students, "Who needs to talk to me today about their building design?" Ricki raised his hand as he ate. Mr. Schuler asked the students to begin their work, and he proceeded to visit each of the students who had questions at their desks. Ricki continued eating his Fritos for another 15 minutes, as the rest of the students worked on their projects. When Ricki is finished eating, he rolled the napkin up in a ball, walked to the trash can, and threw it away.

Mr. Schuler asked me if I knew where Ms. Jackson went. I told him that I didn't know, and he then asked me if I would help Ricki with his project. I agreed, and I asked Ricki if he would wash his hands before we began our project. Ricki got up, washed his hands, dried them, and he returned to his seat. I brought him some Aflix cubes that I collected, and he sat down and started attaching them. I asked him what he's building, and he told me, "A fire station". Ricki continued to build with his blocks for another 15 minutes, and I proceeded to help some other students who had asked for my assistance.

Ms. Jackson walked into the room, and pulled up a chair next to Ricki and I. Ricki manipulated the blocks for another five minutes, then started taking apart his block invention, and threw the individual blocks on the floor, slightly irritated. "He's tired", says Ms. Jackson. Mr. Schuler announced it was time to start cleaning up, and Ricki immediately got up from his chair, and started picking up the blocks he had thrown on the floor. He walked over to the cube container occasionally, with handfuls of cubes, and placed them inside, as did the other students.

My Immediate Reflections

I was very surprised to see how well Ricki was doing in a regular education classroom. It appeared to me that he was trying really hard to be a viable part of the classroom, and that he really wanted to be cooperative, and do all the work assigned to him. Interesting to note is that unlike Eric, the first child with autism I observed, who I believe probably had a higher I. Q. than Ricki, Ricki was more involved in the class activities, and seemed to have a better attitude and to be more well-liked by his classmates. The teacher and paraprofessional also seemed to have higher expectations of Ricki than did Eric's teacher and paraprofessional. In sum, Ricki seemed to be having a better inclusion experience than Eric, as he was more involved in the classroom activities, or at least, knew he could control how involved he was in the classroom activities.

Consequently, it appeared Ricki had a more positive attitude about school than Eric did, after I observed Ricki's classroom on the first day.

Reflecting back to what I observed in Eric's class, the paraprofessional there, as well as the teacher, did not seem to mind that Eric was doing a lot of isolated work. I observed him at the back corner of the room wrestling with the paraprofessional, and reading all by himself, and I wondered, "Is this not self-containing the child, masked with the façade of inclusion?" I must say though, that the adults did admit Eric had come a long way, socially wise, and that involving him with the other students, because of his autism, was difficult.

Second Observation 12:50 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Since I wanted to get a feel of how the day progressed for Ricki, and particularly, the afternoon's activities, I decided that it would be helpful to observe the classroom for a whole afternoon. I interviewed Mr. Schuler during lunch, and after the interview, as Mr. Schuler prepared for his afternoon, I sat and observed students coming in from lunch.

Before any of the other students entered, Ricki came in, accompanied to the classroom by the boy who sits next to him. The boy gently, although somewhat detached and rudely, pushed Ricki into the classroom, closed the door in front of Ricki, and walked away. Ricki stared out of the door's window, as he watched students walk by. I was slightly disturbed by what I saw, but I felt that perhaps I may have been overreacting. When I later observed this boy in class, he seemed to have a cold and distant way about the way he works, that seemed to parallel the way he acted with Ricki. I figured, that his manner was part of his personality, and probably had nothing to do with Ricki. Ricki's mother also told me the boy had known Ricki since kindergarten, and had been a great help to Ricki.

When students started coming in from lunch, Ricki remained on the floor in front of the door, rolling around with a container of white out in his hand. Ms. Jackson came in, and asked Ricki, "Have you eaten your lunch?" Ricki responded, "Yea". Ms. Jackson opened his backpack, took out his lunch bag, and his uneaten lunch, and set it on the table in front of him. Ricki remained on the floor, and Ms. Jackson said, "Let's see what there is to eat...I see applesauce, yogurt, and oh, Fritos, my favorite, I think I'll eat those." Ricki quickly got up, and sat at his desk. Ricki appeared annoyed by the way that Ms. Jackson opened up the napkin and set it on his desk, so he took it from her, and opened it up and set it on his desk in the way it was placed there before, the previous day. Ricki spent about 20 minutes eating his lunch.

Mr. Schuler asked me if I would like to play catch with him, as the students were engaged in the last twenty minutes of their sustained silent reading. Mr. Schuler humorously tossed the ball to me, standing on desks, tables, and chairs, trying to distract students as they read, which he did so in order to help them train their concentration skills. I couldn't help but giggle silently, as I moved around the room and played catch with Mr. Schuler. Soon, Ms. Jackson joined in the fun, and I was immediately reminded of the reasons why I so admired Mr. Schuler as a 5th and 6th grader in his class.

As the reading period ended, and Ricki picked up the remains of his lunch and threw them away, Mr. Schuler transitioned into a combined science and social studies lesson, and distributed and explained a mapping activity. It took Mr. Schuler about 15 minutes to give the students background knowledge and to explain the activity, and all the while, Ricki seemed focused on Mr. Schuler's every word.

Mr. Schuler asked me if I'd like to help Ricki, as the student-directed segment of the lesson began, and I agreed. Involving coloring, tracing, and writing, Ricki seemed reluctant to join in, since he is aware that his fine motor skills are not at the same level as the average student's his age. Ms. Jackson later told me that he doesn't have good writing skills, and I hoped that Ricki never heard adults talking about "What he's not good at".

Ms. Jackson told me it was time for Ricki to be tested, and she asked me if I'd like to go down to the office with her and Ricki. I agreed, and as soon as we arrived at the school psychologist's office, I politely stood outside. I heard the psychologist whispering to Ms. Jackson, "She can't be here", and I popped my head in and said, "Oh, if I can't be here, that's okay... Will you be doing anything later that I can observe?... If not, I'll just wait back in the classroom". I was annoyed that she couldn't openly communicate to me that I shouldn't be present unless I had permission. Not only had I felt like I had imposed on my visit, but I was annoyed with the fact that Ricki had the legal right to privacy in this situation, and that that right should not be whispered, but openly communicated. Nonetheless, I was polite, smiled, and told Ricki and Ms. Jackson I'd see them back at the room. Because I was so polite, I'm sure the psychologist didn't know how offended I really was.

Back in the classroom, I helped students with their mapping activity for about a half an hour, until Ricki returned with Ms. Jackson. Ricki didn't immediately come in though, he stayed out in the hallway for about five minutes, admiring the artwork on the hallway walls. When he did enter, Mr. Schuler announced it was recess time. I agreed to stay in the classroom with the students who preferred to have an indoor recess, and I played various games with them as Ricki enjoyed a snack of more Fritos.

When the day ended, I meet Ricki's mother, who came to pick him up. I introduced myself, told her about my project, and asked her if I could interview her, and she enthusiastically gave me her home and beeper numbers. I thought, "What an absolutely charming woman... She is truly the first person I've run into who isn't scared to talk".

Ms. Jackson told Ricki's mom about the day, and they talked about some weekend plans they had made together with their families.

My Immediate Reflections

The first significant observation that I made during this second observation of Mr. Schuler's class, was that whenever Ricki was in the classroom, he sat and listened attentively and participated constructively, when he was able to, during the whole afternoon. Not many fifth grade children can do that, let alone on a Friday afternoon.

Another significant observation I made was that Ricki was comfortable having his mother come pick him up (I know I would have been embarrassed to have my mom come and pick me up!), and that Ms. Jackson, and Mr. Schuler seemed to have a very close relationship with Ricki's family. I was very happy to learn that Ms. Jackson's family and Ricky's family spent time outside of school together. I felt like that fact had a huge positive impact on Ricky's self esteem and level of comfort while at school.

Conversely, Eric seemed to ignore his mother when she came to pick him up. And interestingly, as I reflect, I saw a lot of antisocial gestures in her conduct, as can be deemed typical of a child at a certain spectrum of autism. I wondered how much of Eric's behavior was due to his disability, and how much of it was due to his parental modeling.

Comparing My Cumulative Observations of Both “Eric” and “Ricky”

Comparing my reflections of my observations of both Eric and Ricki, I find that Mr. Schuler seemed much more at ease, more communicative, and more open to discussion than Mrs. Crane was, when he interacted with Eric’s mom. When Eric’s mom came to pick him up at the laser show assembly, during my second observation of Eric, she didn’t even say hello to the teacher, and waited only for Eric to come to her. Mrs. Crane seemed very uncomfortable, but still managed to say hello. I think it is easy to draw the conclusion that the more the parent trusts the school is doing the best job it can do (when it of course is), and also demonstrates an understanding that teachers and other professionals mean well, the better the communications becomes between home and school. I believe by being friendly, and realizing that teachers and other professionals are there to help one’s child, the parent knocks down the barrier that is frequently erected by parents, who are well-intentioned in their pursuit to protect their child who has special needs.

In informal conversations with the people I interviewed during both projects, it was commented that Eric’s mother has the reputation of being defensive, and she does not hesitate to forcefully vocalize what she wants for her child. She is seen by some as pushy. On the other hand, Ricki’s mom has a friendly and inviting demeanor, and appears to be very open to suggestions and comments. I believe Ricki’s mom is very responsible for the way the adults in Ricky’s life seem to be more helpful, and insightful in their communications with the child and with the home.

First Interview

“Jina Zannuck”, the school psychologist

3:30 p. m. to 3:45 p. m.

Ms. Zannuck has a master’s degree in child psychology, and has her own office in the building, next to the principal’s office. She is based in Lauren Elementary three days a week, and has been at the school for five years.

Zannuck has enjoyed much freedom in the district. “I’ve been pretty fortunate to be able to design my own role here in this district. It really all depends on the flexibility of the principal.” Some of the creativity Zannuck has contributed was the design of “Trailblazers”, which is a program where high school students are brought in to work one on one as tutors for students for a half hour every day.

When asked why she believes she had the reputation of being very involved, and a “big help”, Zannuck responds that it’s probably so because she used to work in the school full time, and was able to be of assistance almost all the time. She comments that most school psychologists in the district are split between two buildings, and that, “. . .It makes it hard to be regularly a part of a student’s life.”

The two schools in which Zannuck now works in are Lauren, and the middle school Lauren feeds into. “They think I would be a good continuity person to help with the transition from this school, elementary school, to the middle school, where the kids here will go to once they leave here.”

In fact, Ricki is currently being transitioned into the middle school, with the assistance of Zannuck. In a discussion after this interview, Ricki commented that he was very excited to go to

middle school. His feelings are quite different from the terrified feelings I had of going to middle school.

The biggest overall benefit of inclusion, according to Zannuck, is the social exposure. “Modeling is the main draw”, comments Zannuck. Inclusion, according to Zannuck, seems to become less valuable after elementary school, “...Since the material is so above the level of where the child is at. What’s the point of being in a middle school algebra class when the child can’t cope in the daily world—but if you can find a balance, combined with some pull-out programs where the students get what they need, it can be very beneficial.”

Second Interview

“Brett Schuler”, Ricki’s teacher

11:30 a.m. to 12:15 p. m.

According to Mr. Schuler, twenty-three years ago, when he first came to the district as a rookie teacher, special needs children in the school used to be educated separately. “We used to visit them or they used to visit us. Now there is more of a move towards inclusion. I would say most special needs students are included, but some may still be not”, notes Schuler.

The first child that was ever included into Schuler’s class had, like Ricki, Down syndrome. He was fortunate to have all his accommodations recommended, adding, “I didn’t have to fight for aids or anything like that.”

When asked if it was difficult to adapt to inclusion, Schuler comments, “Each child I’ve had [with special needs] came with an aid, so it really wasn’t anything that made me scared. It was just a matter of being willing to try something new. It didn’t bother me either way.”

Mr. Schuler notes that Ricki is in the classroom about 75 to 95 percent of the time, and adds, “He does most of the work load given to him.”

Besides Ricki’s noticeable accommodations of a special desk, chair, and pillow, Schuler notes that he works with the P. E. C. S. system of communication, which entails using Velcro pictures which are put together to form sentences. Schuler adds that Ricki’s mother helps him a lot using this system.

Some of the improvements noted in Ricki’s performance include improvements in his speech, in his creation of sentences, and his increased willingness to sit and listen to lessons. “When he was in the younger grades, he would get up most of the time and disturb the class—you’d hardly know he’s here now. He’s become very patient and he’s doing better and better at reading...He reads a great genre of material”, remarks Schuler.

Quite remarkably, Schuler notes that “[Ricki] is reading at least one grade level above in reading and comprehension...Now...he’s not always able to express that when he reads, but he reads well.”

Ricki is also working in a cooperative learning group. “He’s working in a group right now. I have groups of students with five to six students in each group, and he’s doing really well. He’s reading a book right now at the fifth grade level”, states Schuler.

Mr. Schuler believes that Ricki has benefited most from being around other children his own age that are in a regular education classroom. “The children really accept and appreciate him when he does something well...And they congratulate him”, notes Schuler. He also believes that inclusion has been very successful for Ricki. “It’s a person by person thing...The key is that you’ve got a parent working very hard to make it successful”, comments Schuler.

Third Interview
 “Diona Jackson”, Ricki’s paraprofessional
 3:45 p. m. to 4:45 p. m.

Ms. Jackson has worked as a paraprofessional in Ricki’s classrooms for three years. She has a very good relationship with the family, and before her daughter went away for college, she was frequently a baby sitter for Ricki and his sister. Ms. Jackson also has a good relationship with Mr. Schuler, and together, they frequently attend workshops and developmental educational conferences. More importantly, Ms. Jackson has a wonderful relationship with Ricki, and they seem to be very good friends.

Jackson believes Ricki is doing very well socially. “He likes the kids, and the kids like him. He meets friends easily too”, notes Jackson.

When asked what she feels are the biggest advantages of inclusion, Jackson states, “[Inclusion] educates all students about differences, about the different people found in society. It’s amazing how kids don’t have screens up like adults do. They are more accepting than most adults.”

Jackson elaborated on the P. E. C. S. system of communication, which Mr. Schuler and her first heard about at a conference. “Mr. Schuler and I went to the P. E. C. S. conference together. We try to train ourselves, and educate ourselves as much as we can.”

Using her P. E. C. S. training, Jackson even created little visual Velcro icons of the things Ricki likes. “In it we’ve included pictures of things he likes, like applesauce, Fritos, and yogurt—that’s about all he eatssince he had an operation on his stomach—I’m not sure exactly what the operation was for, but those foods really help him”, comments Jackson.

In terms of the supports that Ricki receives, Jackson notes that, “He works with an O. T., a P. T. (physical therapist), and a speech and language therapist. His speech is much clearer and easier to understand since he’s been working with the speech and language therapist.”

Jackson notes that the O. T. has taught her and Mr. Schuler a great deal about sensory issues, diet, brushing, and the O. T. has even trained them on how to adapt their teaching styles. “You’ve probably heard [Ricki] make grinding noises, those grinding noises are sensory issues. The O. T. has worked with him on that, and the pillow he sits on helps him sit still. The way he walks now is a great improvement. The physical therapist comes in once a month. The O.T. comes in from the W. I. S. D. (Washentenaw Intermediate School District)”, notes Jackson.

When asked about some of Ricki’s improvements Jackson notes, “From what I understand, when he came here in kindergarten he couldn’t walk, and now he walks very well. He loves sports. He likes football and hockey. Today is also the longest he’s sat this year. The first year I was with him he sat for 15-20 minutes at the most. The second year he could sit for around 30 minutes. Now, in the third year I’m with him...Well, he’s been sitting for over an hour and a half.”

When describing some of the benefits of inclusion for Ricki, Jackson states, “He likes being around his friends, and they like to be around him. You may think he’s not paying attention, but he really is. The kid next to him, ‘Quenton’, has sat with him since kindergarten. When these kids see the needs of Ricki, they protect him and they help him out. It’s nice to watch him interact with the kids.”

“[Ricki] won’t tell you when he’s sick, because that’ll mean that he’ll miss school. He really loves school. He loves every sport, and knows about every sports person you can think of, and he loves to read books about sports figures”, remarks Jackson.

Jackson was very vocal on the improvements in inclusion she feels need to be made in the district. “The district needs to be more supportive, by providing for the needs of special students more effectively. Their priorities are screwed up. The special services provided are not enough—there’s not enough O. T.’s (occupational therapists) or speech therapists. They’re too spread out throughout the district. We need more of these support people in the district”, states Jackson.

When discussing the district’s plan to try and create a building teacher assistance instead of assigning one paraprofessional to each classroom with a special needs child, Jackson warns, “They better watch out because you do find that there are kids that are abused, even sexually abused. By ignoring the needs of the child like that, the emotional needs, you will see the issue filter out into the classroom, and it will become a behavioral problem, and ultimately, a learning problem.”

Jackson has a special needs person in her family, and describes her family’s treatment of her niece’s disability. “I think a lot of people are in denial. My niece is severely handicapped. Her family moved out east to Connecticut, because there’s a lot more advanced systems in place there. I think politicians there were more sensitive to the needs of people with special needs, like the Kennedy family. They had a handicapped person in their family so I think they had a lot to do with the social improvements of the handicapped”, comments Jackson.

Visiting her niece in Connecticut was very inspiring for Jackson. “I went out to see my niece compete in the Special Olympics—Connecticut is where the first Special Olympics occurred—and it just moves you to see all these people from different countries, where everyone is considered special”, Jackson fondly remarks.

Fourth Interview
 “Debbie Gibbons”, Ricki’s mother
 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.

When I met “Debbie” after school on Friday, March 9th, the first impression she gave me was of a woman who stopped at nothing to help her children be the best they could be, and one that capitalized on all the resources available to her and her son.

When I called Debbie to schedule the time for the interview, she invited me over, and told me I could feel free to bring my four-year-old daughter along too. I took Debbie up on her offer, and after Sunday brunch, my daughter and I walked to Ricki’s house, as we enjoyed the sunny afternoon.

Debbie greeted us at the door, along with her two, gorgeous dogs that gave us an equally warm greeting. After my daughter met Ricki, and “Elizabeth”, Ricki’s sister, and was given a few toys to play with, Debbie and I sat in the kitchen and began the interview.

Debbie is a registered nurse, and health educator for the district. Part of her job entails her being the school nurse at Lauren one day a week, and also the nurse for the Ann Arbor preschool program and family center, which includes working in the intervention program for zero to three-year-old children. She also works as a nurse in the district for special needs children aged zero to three-years-old, and preprimary impaired children three-years-old to kindergarten. On top of all of this, Debbie is the nurse for Head Start, in Ann Arbor.

In addition, Debbie is also the president of a parent and family organization of people with Down syndrome. “It’s called the Washtenaw Down Syndrome Support Group. I think it

was started at least 20-25 years ago by Dr. Elkins—he has been on some of the boards that come up with the rules—he’s been consulting with some of that”, says Debbie.

“We meet once a month, here at our house. The whole family is invited to come. I invite speakers of interest who are willing to speak in an environment like this for free. It’s a really wonderful group”, says Debbie of her organization. “What I do is talk these speakers into doing it for free. Occasionally I’ll ask for money to buy reference books for our library, but I usually buy the books and I loan them out. I have a whole bunch of books that can be checked out”, adds Debbie.

Guest speakers in the past have included teachers, teacher consultants who come and talk about I. E. P.’s, occupational therapists, physical therapists, music therapists, toy makers who make special toys for children with disabilities, and lawyers have come to talk about wills.

“Wills have to be different when a special needs person is in the family”, states Debbie.

Debbie has also had meetings with themes, such as a “Bring Your Favorite Book” meeting, and tea parties. “We’ve had over 50 people in our house before. People come from all over, but mostly they’re from Washtenaw County. All the siblings play together—last spring we had a tea party out on the back lawn, and we laid out blankets and everyone brought plastic tea stuff and spread it out. We have 83 people on the mailing list” says Debbie.

“I’m also a part of the M. E. T. (Multi-Disciplinary Evaluation Team)—it’s the initial referral which is done by the parent and the appropriate professional people that determine to do an assessment, and the nursing assessment is part of the referral. The team does an assessment with the input of the parents and the assessment team, and as a group, the M. E. T. produces an evaluation. This team assessment determines eligibility—it determines whether the child is eligible for special education. Once the child is found eligible, then you write an I. E. P. (Individualized Education Program) based on the information contained in the M. E. T. This is from I. D. E. A. 97” says Debbie of the M. E. T.

Ricki has a nurse, physical therapist, occupational therapist, speech therapist, psychologist, principal, teacher, paraprofessional, teacher consultant from the W. I. S. D., and a school teacher consultant, as well as his parents who are part of his I. E. P. team.

“Ricki has a speech therapist three times a week, as a pullout...He has an occupational therapist and direct service is once a week. Sometimes it’s a pullout, and sometimes the O. T. consults in the class with Diona Jackson. The physical therapist is supposed to meet with Ricki once monthly, but from September to December she didn’t see him” Debbie says. She notes that even though a physical therapist is on Ricki’s I. E. P. to meet with him once monthly, she couldn’t because she’s got such a heavy case load.

“He has all the typical supports regular education kids have, which is neat in that they do understand and support Ricki. He has Diona, that is, she’s there and helps whenever he needs it. She provides a good balance of being there when he needs it. He has his friends who are huge supports, and many of the staff, such as the gym teacher, librarian, all the specials teachers, and Mr. Schuler are there to advocate for him”, Debbie adds.

No services are provided for Ricki at home, but Debbie does get moral support from caring individuals on the I. E. P. team. “Diona calls me a lot because sometimes I get discouraged—there are still times when I grieve, and worry about the future of Ricki. It’s usually around the transitional times of the year—around his birthday and such—it pulls at my heart that Ricki has to work so hard, but I don’t mean to say I don’t love him the way he is. There are times when I leave him, and I ask myself, ‘Is he going to handle it okay?’ That’s

really common with every parent I talk with and even though you're really happy things are going well—sometimes you just think this”, Debbie confides.

When asked to elaborate on Ricki's impairments, Debbie says, “He has Hirschprung's disease, where part of the colon wasn't intervated, it was still inside and it didn't have nerve endings. He had a colostomy for two years, during the early intervention part of his life.”

“He also had infantile spasms—which is really ipsorhythmia, which causes seizures. What it is, is a huge amount of electrical activity in the brain. Fortunately, kids with Down syndrome have a better prognosis with this. Ricki was treated with high doses of steroids—and A. E. T. H. therapy also. The seizures went away and he was eventually weaned of medication. Kids that have those seizures tend to degenerate overall—they do a lot of damage to the brain, and these kids tend to end up with autistic features”, describes Debbie.

Debbie makes it a point to involve Ricki in extracurricular activities, and has even enlisted him in swimming classes, sports activities, and he plays the drums and xylophone in instrumental music with the rest of the students. “The music teacher works really well with him”, says Debbie.

When I told Debbie that Mr. Schuler told me he has excellent reading skills, she smiled and her whole face brightened. When asked why she thought he's doing so well, Debbie commented, “Well we...with all our kids...we just read. We read a lot with the kids, and we have a lot of good books around. I've worked with him tremendously”, Debbie says.

“I don't know if you've ever heard the story of him in first grade...”, Debbie says in a questioning way.

“No, I haven't”, I reply.

“Well, in first grade, Robert goes in, and she's [the teacher] doing reading groups. She didn't put him in a reading group, she didn't include him in the activity. Well, the next day, we came to school, and he marched right in with a book in hand and started to read it, and she said, ‘I didn't know kids with Down syndrome read’. Ricki went and got another book that we hadn't read, trying to prove he really could read anything, and he read it to her and she started crying...She was very touched”, Debbie fondly remembers.

“I have worked with him a lot... He was really sick when he was an infant, and I spent a lot of time showing him pictures and books. He went from being well as an infant, to being a blob...It was horrible and disheartening. He literally had to sit in a special chair so he wouldn't choke on his own fluids. The doctors said he would be a vegetable...We read constantly. I wrote words on note cards...We made a chores list...We had things labeled with post it notes”, Debbie adds.

When asked how effective she believes inclusion has been for Ricki, if his needs are being met, and what has helped Ricki the most, Debbie responds, “Being with peers, having true friends, and being around typically developing peers. He's also just learned a tremendous amount more than if he were in a self-contained classroom. That's because expectations are so much lower in those types of classes. That's one of the many cool things—Mr. Schuler expects him to be able to do many things”, Debbie says, sparking in me a very appropriate memory to report.

When I was having problems with math in fifth grade, Mr. Schuler never gave up on me either. He had such high expectations. He never stopped believing in me. This wonderful man even gave up his Saturdays to come in to help me with my math. He just wouldn't give up. Soon I moved from the low math group, to the high math group, and gained a lot of confidence.

Debbie believes that more can still be done to meet the needs of the family of special needs students in the district. “The only thing that would be helpful—and it isn’t a huge problem—is to give parents more information. Also, to have more team meetings, and to have more times where I can learn about how they’re working with Ricki... To hear about the kinds of things they’re doing... So I would say more feedback, more teaching back and forth. An example would be to have the speech therapist have meetings with us where we could learn about strategies that we could do at home also. Sharing these strategies with me, I could share them with others. I don’t know if more team meetings could be possible because of the time issue. Time is a huge problem. There is not enough time. Ricki is not the only kid in the class, but Mr. Schuler has always been nice enough to give extra time”, Debbie says.

Debbie confided in me her opinion of the district’s plans to cut some of the special education programs, and namely, creating building assistants, where a teacher assistant would be assigned to more than one child. “There’s research out now that says that inclusion students may not be benefiting from one on one assistance, and the district is showing it. All the parents I spoke to feel that the only reason it may be true is that the paraprofessionals they do have are not adequately trained. If paraprofessionals are appropriately trained, and Diona is appropriately trained, they are very good, because they understand what inclusion is all about”, Debbie asserts.

“So do you feel they are doing this to justify their cutbacks?” I ask.

“Yes, absolutely. Ann Arbor Public Schools were recently sued by substitute teachers, and they’re trying to cut back a lot of the programs.”

Describing the repercussions of this initiative, Debbie says, “What is going to happen is that either before or at every I. E. P., the team will write out what will help the student, the time of day the student will get the help they need, and it will state how that help will be provided. They’ll be coming up with some sort of form. The team would come up with this information, then send it to a special education director, and that person would review it to determine whether it means that the child really needs an extra person to help him or her. Then that information will go to the school administrator or principal, and that person would find the appropriate resources to meet that need”, Debbie describes.

Debbie warns, “What they are planning to do may not be good for the child or the whole classroom because if the child becomes disruptive, that would lead to not allowing the regular ed. kids the opportunity to learn best. What will end up happening is the teacher will have a list, which will contain the needs the child needs help with, and the times of day assistance will come. What they are not respecting is the fact that a teacher’s day does not always end up flowing the way she develops it. For example, math could be planned for a certain time, but if the teacher feels the class needs a break because of whatever may have come up, such as something unexpected, the schedule is changed.”

When asked what advice she would give to a parent of a special needs child who is afraid of the concept of inclusion, Debbie responds, “I would almost want them to come in and see Ricki and his friends, to see how much Ricki has gained. I think it’s important for parents to visit classes before enrolling their kids in them.”

Debbie suggests to parents who will be including their special needs child, “...Go to the I. E. P. meetings with what you want clearly written—what you feel is best for your child. Parents know what would be best... And also, stick to your guns about it. Many forces are at work—we know our children best, and we know what they need. You may be dealing with professionals, but they don’t know our kids.”

Ricki gets along very well with his siblings. Debbie asks Ricki, who has just walked over to the kitchen table and joined our conversation, “Do you love Bill?”

“Yes”, responds Ricki.

“Do you love Elizabeth?” Asks Debbie.

“Yes”, responds Ricki.

Debbie adds, “Elizabeth has a gift about her. First of all, she really loves Ricki. She knows how to help him just enough to give him a nudge, but she doesn’t over help him. I remember when they were littler, she used to jump off the couch, and she saw that Ricki wanted to jump too. So she adapted the game for him and had him jumping off the pillows while she, in sync, jumped off the couch and said, ‘One, two, three, jump!’ He did it, and even learned how to say ‘jump’ because of it.”

When asked what she sees Ricki doing when he grows up, Debbie says, “I picture him working in a library, working as a reference person—Not with files or things like that, but doing the tangible reference stuff. I see him doing that...Also, I see him teaching sports to kids.”

Debbie turns her attention to Ricki, “What do you want to do when you grow up, Ricki?”

“I want to play football and basketball”, responds Ricki.

Fifth Interview

“Bill Murray”, superintendent of the Washtenaw Intermediate School District

10:15 a. m. to 12:15 p. m.

“Dr. Murray” is a very busy person, and I consider myself very fortunate to have met this wonderful person. We met in his office at the Washtenaw Intermediate School District at 10:15 a. m. His secretary, “Cathleen O’ Reilley”, was extremely warm and welcoming, and as I waited to meet Dr. Murray, we had a pleasant little chat about education, and life in general.

Created in the 1960’s, I. S. D.’s were created all across the states by an act of the legislature and because we have a relatively small and weak state education system. They were created to act as a sort of arm of the state, in terms of their responsibility for education. “I. S. D.’s are unique to Michigan. There are some regional school districts in other states, but not as many services in other states as in Michigan”, states Murray.

As the superintendent of the school district, Murray’s job entails many activities. “I’m responsible for the operations of the school district with the exception of policy making decisions—the school board has that responsibility, and we only make recommendations. Special education is one service we provide, along with technology service, professional development, and instructional services. We do a lot with teacher materials, grants, and program development and a lot of the professional development is for bus drivers, sometimes parents, and we handle a lot of money”, states Murray.

Murray started working at the W. I. S. D. in 1988. “I was hired into this organization because of a collective...or...they didn’t have a name then, but there were consumers, or a group of customers who had children in specialized programs. And politically, there was the developing of new options for students with disabilities, and we thought if we could educate most children or students with volunteering parents, we would try Supported Education. That’s when we started writing about it in “Educating All Students Together”. It basically said that any child, regardless of disability, would have the option to go to the school they would normally go to if they didn’t have the disability”, states Murray. In fact, Murray estimated that today, 95 percent of students with special needs attend their neighborhood schools.

Inclusion in the district was prompted by advocacy. “Advocacy came from the top down and down up. We built the system where there was the first option of being educated locally. There were other options too—such as regional settings and classrooms. We have maintained some special schools, and we only have one separate school in the district, called Forest Avenue. It is mostly for severely emotionally disturbed or behaviorally acting out students who have difficult behaviors or have had a history of psychiatric treatment in the past. These are students that are difficult to include because of severely disrupting aggression”, Murray posits.

Next door to the W. I. S. D. sits the location of Highpoint, which is a school containing 90 students who are in a medically fragile condition, that are either very physically or medically involved. “We also offer to the older students there, Supportive Employment. These students actually work in the community or provide a community service. From the ages of 18 to 26 they are educated in community settings, in places like video stores, or other service industries primarily. We also have students in computer entry... They work at recreation centers, the universities, and food service. So through this system we establish policies and supports, and personnel that know what to do [with employed students]—such as the case coordinator who works as a liaison”, Murray adds.

During the first four years that Murray was with the district, there was a considerable amount of case study and research done, from the years of 1989-1993. “I came into contact with [your professor] when we contracted professionals from the Developmental Disability Institute to see how students were performing in inclusive settings”, says Murray. “After 10 years, we found significant results, and they were more than just social. Depending on how involved the included student was in class—and the key is how much the other students are involved—helped and engaged the students [with special needs]”, Murray adds.

Some of the improvements found included, “Better appearance; much better attention and engagement, and more able to engage in tasks; better social skills, including making eye contact, greeting, and initiating; also, the biggest improvement was in language—by being included in activities, [the special needs student] develops better language skills. This carries over into vocational and career areas. In some students, we’ve seen academic improvement. This all depends on the instruction—on the ownership”, summarizes Murray.

“The inclusion experience for students with disabilities is only as good as the school or the classroom of where they’re included. You have to have good instruction to begin with. The key ingredients are spending multiple years with students, and having someone who understands the nature of the disability, and also having the student participate”, Murray says enthusiastically, with the assurance provided of a wealth of experience under his belt.

Murray does not advocate the presence of a paraprofessional in the classroom. “I don’t advocate having a paraprofessional ever. I’d rather have them [special needs students] work with peers. You don’t create an inclusive environment within another one, using paraprofessionals. I would use a paraprofessional assigned to the school building, or minimally to a classroom or to a team of teachers, or as a building assistant—you need a pair of hands to move students around, or for toileting. One on one glued to the kid is not serving the child well”, holds Murray, whose beliefs are notably in disagreement with Ricki’s mother.

When asked why he so staunchly disagrees with using paraprofessionals in the way they are currently being used, Murray states, “Because it creates dependent, not effective use of resources, and there are a lot more students than just one child that benefits—if kids help each other. Having a paraprofessional with the whole class is more effective than just having them for just one person”, says Murray.

An alternative to the “one on one” approach described by Murray would be realizing the concept of team teaching in more classrooms, where two teachers, usually a regular education and special education teacher both teach the same group of students. Describing whether or not Murray agrees with this idea he states, “Absolutely—That’s one of the aspects of what we’re working on.” There are three ideas in school reform right now described by Murray, and they include creating a personalized approach to learning for every child, the teaming of teachers and support staff, each bringing their expertise to bear on the instruction process, and using differentiated instruction.

When asked how effective he feels the process of implementing inclusion has been, Murray responds, “I would say it’s a qualified success in that its been hard to change people’s attitudes about belonging.” Murray adds, “Generally, it’s been successful for special needs kids. We’re in a fortunate community—there are a lot of supports, but there’s a lot of things that need to be done for students and their families. A lot of people don’t know it was a fight to get inclusion”, states Murray.

Murray feels that inclusion has a positive effect on all individuals involved. “[We see] all positive and no negative effects. When kids are allowed to be involved in education and when cooperative learning strategies are used—there has been mostly positive effects on teacher’s attitudes and teaching practices”.

When asked why he thinks he’s been often called a pioneer in inclusion, Murray modestly replies as he smiles shyly “I think we were the first place in Michigan to actually adopt the [service] of offering inclusive options for kids, and giving the opportunity. Families and children are actually the pioneers—they took the risk and had to fight to make it work. I’m an educational reform person, trying to make schools more effective. Inclusion is one aspect to make schools more responsive and effective.”

My Breakdown, During My Interview with “Dr. Murray”

During the remaining portion of the interview, when inspired to ask Dr. Murray why my educational planning by the district went the way it did, spurred by his mention of the practice of tracking, the interview took a more personal road. The course of the interview changed when, from what I remember him saying about tracking, ‘It’s a great concept, and there are many skills that are learned, but it is not respected’.

Dr. Murray was the second person who brought the practice of tracking to my attention. Dr. Hale, a distinguished educational researcher and mentor of mine was the first. Reading the manuscript of her book now in press, I found out I was discriminated against as a student in the Ann Arbor Public School system, and my educational future was molded by strangers, without my asking the schools to do so.

To give readers a basic idea of what tracking is, I will briefly describe it from what I have understood it to mean. There are different paths, or “tracks” within the system of education. One is the academic track, the second is the secretarial, or business track, and the third is the industrial track, which includes vocational education. This track includes such things as home building, working in the preparation of the district’s cafeteria food, clothes design and making, and working towards a beautician’s and/or manicurist certification. There may be more tracks, but the ones I described were the ones I recall as a student in the Ann Arbor Public Schools. “If you look at the A. P. courses of students in the academic track, they are smaller classes, they give personal attention, they look at the classics, and it is based on enrichment”, says Murray. In fact,

because of the better education students are getting in this track, they are in no doubt trained in these courses, through their content's enrichment, to outperform other students on such standardized tests as the S. A. T. and A. C. T. Interestingly, my counselor never mentioned my having to take these tests, let alone preparing for these tests.

Why the school had decided to place me in the secretarial track, I don't know. I remember frequently visiting the principal's office, who I thought was a public official working for the betterment of my educational future, and a friend, and confiding in him that I one day wanted to be a lawyer. Was he laughing behind my back when I told him this? Why didn't he tell me that the school had not planned this for my future? More importantly, now that I think about it, why did my secretarial class consist disproportionately of African American and bilingual students—who were all women?

Dr. Murray informed me that they probably made that decision based on standardized test scores, and I informed him that from what I remember, on the M. E. A. P. I had scored in the 96th (could have been 98th) percentile. He looked puzzled, then told me, "Maybe they stereotyped you then, as a pretty blonde, with not too many goals." Infuriated with the thought, but much indebted to Dr. Murray's frankness of sharing this information, a tear rolled down my face.

I further confided in Dr. Murray, "When I visited my councilor, who had been with me from grades 7 to 12, during my college years, upon seeing me she said, "Lana, you're not that beauty queen I remember you being."

Dr. Murray looked down at the pen he was holding, looking almost remorseful for something he had not been responsible for, my words reassuring his suspicions.

"Dr. Murray, I didn't know whether I should take her comment as a criticism—Was I no longer pretty? Or as a compliment—did I no longer wear too much makeup, or feather my hair a la 80's super model style which had now gone out of style, and by doing this, did I look smarter?)"

"They most likely, then, stereotyped you as a [ditsy] blonde", confided Dr. Murray. "You are one of only a few who can be called a survivor of the system... You've proven, at least to yourself, that what they planned for you was not realistic", added Murray.

I then added, "When I told my counselor that I was at the University of Michigan her jaw dropped. She was speechless. When I saw her reaction I cringed for a moment, furrowed my brow, very surprised by her reaction, as I was an excellent reader of body language and said to myself, 'Didn't I tell these people I was going to be a lawyer— didn't they know I was smart?'" Needless to say, she didn't even congratulate me, and I soon became suspicious of the fact that she had not been a true counselor.

Dr. Murray passed me a box of tissues, and said, "I always have this effect on people, it's not surprising." He had this effect on me...because...Well because he was the only person who I've met after Dr. Hale and subsequently Dr. Peterson, who has been a tangible role model in my life, that has been brave enough to speak about the unfairness in education. I was crying because of my past struggles, I was crying because I now had a professional who confirmed my suspicions. I was crying because my parents, who moved to the United States to give their children a better life, and then specifically to Ann Arbor, to give them a better education, were ignored, not respected, not informed, stripped of their greatest desire—to give us the best education possible.

The system had low expectations of me. I now know it. I now sarcastically wonder, did my placement in another track other than the academic track have anything to do with the fact that my parents both worked and never had the time to attend school P. T. A. meetings? Or to

“check up” on the teachers as many other parents did through volunteering their services at school? It’s interesting to note that all the students who had parents who volunteered for the school were placed in the academic track. Or did my placement have anything to do with the fact that my parents were immigrants, not educated past the sixth grade, spoke broken English, and advised me, ‘Respect your teachers, they know what is best’?

As I write, I still feel my blood boiling, and the warmth of my tears rolling. I feel I was a victim of inequality, and I feel shame for not knowing what was going on as a student in high school. Why couldn’t my counselor and principal have been more like Mr. Schuler? Why couldn’t they have seen what he saw in me? Why didn’t they at least tell me, “Lana, you know, we don’t think you will ever get past high school, and that is why we are training you to work as a secretary, so at least you will have a job after you graduate.” Contradictory to the system’s beliefs of what I was capable of doing, I must now mention my achievements. I graduated from the University of Michigan with a B. A. degree with two majors in Communication and Foreign Languages, I’m 2 credits shy of receiving my M. A. T., I speak four languages, and have worked as a translator, business executive, college lecturer and teacher. Poignantly, and not the least bit ironically, I’m beginning what I was destined to do this fall when I begin my studies towards a J. D. degree in law.

There must be a reason for all that I experienced in my life. The purpose, I believe, was to shape me into a caring individual, who understands the underdog’s plight, who has felt the same iciness of segregation that minorities and people with disabilities have felt. I believe my purpose is to fight for the rights of these individuals, and I believe it is the intensity of my feelings, which give me the strength fueled by my experiences that will support me, and carry me to making this country’s educational and social system equitable.

My Conclusions and Reflections

Professional Conclusions

I have come to agree that we should move away from the notion that the paraprofessional is there to help only the child with special needs. I saw, from first hand experience during my first observation, watching the paraprofessional’s demeanor and focus of attention, and concluded that she focused much unnecessary attention on the child with the disability. She could have used her position much more effectively to promote interaction between the children, and more importantly, she could have promoted the child’s integration into the schedule of all the other children. For example, instead of taking the child out of the classroom right at a specific time, she could have waited, or planned to do so during one of the regular education teacher’s transitions. I believe in doing so, she would have given the child with autism the impression that what the rest of the students are doing is important, and directly relates to his learning as well.

I understand the fears that many parents of special needs students may feel, when and if there is no longer a mandatory one on one connection between student and paraprofessional. Indeed, some students will always need to have a paraprofessional in the same room with them, but I believe there are many instances when a paraprofessional can be used more effectively, as a building assistant, much in the same way Dr. Murray describes in his idealization of the paraprofessional’s role.

Personal Reflections and Recommendations

Before I began my second observation of a child with special needs, and my conducting of a second set of interviews, my feelings about inclusion were much like Susan and William Stainback's (1996). Like the Stainback's, I believe that inclusion is a right of students with special needs, as it relates to the social value of equality.

I now know why I feared some of the special needs students as a kindergarten child—because I didn't understand them, and no one in the position of power at that time was willing to bridge the gap, so that we might understand each other. When, and if we again experience civil unrest, as we did during the Civil Rights Movement, it will be too late to do what Albert Einstein once posited, "Peace cannot be kept by force, it can only be achieved through understanding."

Now that we've made the first move into the right direction, that of pointing out the legal right of students with disabilities to be educated in a regular environment, now we must make the next step to fully convince all parties involved. I believe the next step is to address the university setting. Teachers are in a very powerful position. Any negative feelings they have towards a policy, even when it's not voiced, can be detected through their body language by our most valuable future investments—our children. The teachers of tomorrow must be convinced, not only by our country's stipulations through our legal body of laws and statutes, but they must be convinced through touching their humanistic side. By educating and providing future educators with the research, and case studies done, teaching the wonderful benefits to all students through inclusion, teachers of tomorrow will put their heart into their work, and truly believe inclusion is an obligation and not a burden.

There has been much said about the violence we have recently seen in our nation's schools. One can say we are witnessing an epidemic of rage in the hearts of American children. It is bizarre to us, because it is happening in neighborhoods where children come from two parent homes, have food on the table, and have space to frolic in, amongst the tree and park lined suburbs. We have heard extremists say, "We need religious education". Do we really need more content in our nation's schools, though? Or do our kids, the ones who have everything, but are surprisingly violent, just simply need to feel that they are needed, and not just recipients?

It is my contention that inclusion is a form of moral education. In place of all this talk of religious education, and unbridled media dismay at recent developments, we can focus our attention at what can be done in the classroom, without having to create a new curriculum. Implementing inclusion does not entail having extra content that must be taught, or extra hours of teaching to instill in students the idea that it's okay to have weaknesses, and that it is a highly valued ideal to help someone who needs it. Inclusion is a condition, it's a positive way of thinking and communicating that benefits all students. There is no doubt about it. Inclusion also teaches students at least two things—that our differences are what makes us unique causing us to, no matter what, "fit in", and that ultimately, we all are equally worthy and are begged by society to belong.

References

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