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## **INCLUSIVE SCHOOLING OBSERVATION**

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### Background Information

I visited Mount Elizabeth Elementary School that is located near a moderate sized city in a Mid-western state. Mount Elizabeth Elementary is in a lower middle class working neighborhood. There are about 300 students enrolled in Mount Elizabeth.

The class I observed was a 5th grade class comprised of 25 students. One of the students was Jonathan (not his real name). Jonathan was in his 2nd year at Mount Elizabeth Elementary. Jonathan was the first and only student ever included at Mount Elizabeth. Jonathan is almost fully included. He receives physical therapy for forty minutes everyday.

Jonathan has cerebral palsy. He is bound to a wheel chair and has an IQ just slightly below average. Jonathan's speech is slow and slurred, but understandable.

### Interview and Observation Process

I interviewed the General Education Teacher, Inclusion Specialist, and Classroom Aide. I was able to speak with all three people together in the classroom before school started. All three people seemed enthusiastic, honest, and open during the interview. After the interview I stayed, sitting in the back of the room at a table as the students came in. I was able to observe the morning routine to start the day, the math assignment, and the writing assignment. The classroom was set up in a horseshoe shape with the chalk board directly to the front. Jonathan is located at the end of a row that runs perpendicular to the chalk board. Jonathan is closest to the door. Jonathan uses a desk that allows him to park his wheel chair underneath so he can easily access his desk and anything on it.

### Interviews

I interviewed all three professionals together. The first question I asked was how is mainstreaming or inclusive education being implemented in this school system and building? This question was answered by the inclusion specialist. Washington Local Schools uses a variety of models. Students that are labeled are put into a model that is best suited for their needs, according to their IEP. They could be put into a pull-out program, a special education class, full inclusion, or anything in between.

I asked why full inclusion is not used in every possible case. Her feeling was that inclusion does not best serve the needs of all students.

I then asked how this has developed and what are the future plans? The school district came to the point they are at now, in stages. Inclusion is relatively new to the district. The future plans are to continue with the programs that are now in place. The inclusion specialist made no mention of trying to include more students in the future.

What are the opinions and policies related to "inclusive schooling" in this school, was the next question I asked. This question was answered by all three interviewees. All three people were unaware of any special policies relating to inclusion in the school. They did have some input on opinions of inclusion in the school. They thought that for the most part teachers tended to be in favor of inclusion. Teachers tended to complain if there were behavior problems. Overall, teachers felt that with adequate supports and assistance their position on inclusion was positive.

The next topic discussed focused on the teaching strategies and approaches used at Mount Elizabeth. The teacher did not think that she did anything different or out of the ordinary for Jonathan. The inclusion specialist and aide both disagreed. They both felt that the teacher was using more vocal and visual clues than she used in the beginning of the year. They both agreed that the teacher adapted without even realizing it. I then asked if the increased use of vocal and visual clues worked. All three believed that the strategies being used in the classroom worked well.

I then asked what types of supports are being provided for the teacher and students to assist the student with special needs. The teacher is provided with an aide who stays with Jonathan the whole day except for sometimes in music and during physical therapy. On Wednesdays the aide is needed in other areas of the school.

On these days, the inclusion specialist spends the day with Jonathan. Jonathan is also teamed up with a buddy everyday.

The students sign-up on a volunteer basis for 2 day stints as Jonathans buddy. The buddy system has been very successful.

I then asked about "pull out" versus "supports in" approaches being used. In Jonathan's case he is included the whole day except for physical therapy. Jonathan goes to physical therapy when the rest of the class is going to gym so there is not an academic subject he misses.

Next I asked about what accommodations are being used and how they are planned and implemented. In addition to the full-time aide in class to help Jonathan, the buddy system is also used as mentioned above. The buddy for the day is required to get Jonathan's lunch order and stay with him whenever needed. During assignments the buddy may work at Jonathan's desk if he or she can also complete his/her work. If there is work assigned that requires the student to work alone, the aide will then work with Jonathan.

Jonathan's ability to write is very limited. To accommodate this the buddy or aide will write for Jonathan as he dictates. Jonathan also has a problem remembering information long term. To accommodate this during vocabulary studies, once Jonathan shows mastery of a word he is given credit for knowing it, and is not tested on it later.

These accommodations are planned and implemented by the teacher, inclusion specialist, and aide together. There is also a committee that meets once a month to discuss any needs that Jonathan may have. The committee is made up of the teacher, inclusion specialist, aide, Jonathan's parents, and anyone else who would like to be a part of the team.

We then discussed how effective the inclusive process is for Jonathan, the regular students, and the teacher. Overall at Mount Elizabeth, inclusion has worked very well. The overall education process has improved for everyone involved. All three interviewees say that Jonathan is very happy being included. He also seems to be growing academically.

Jonathan has become a very important person in the classroom.

The regular students in the classroom have also grown from being around Jonathan, says the teacher. The regular students all volunteer to be Jonathan's buddy. The students have been known to wipe Jonathan's mouth and nose as needed. As Jonathan entered the classroom in the morning a handful of students approached him just to hang out and talk with him before class started. The teacher said that the students all genuinely like Jonathan.

The teacher stated that inclusion has also helped her. She has become more aware of doing things that have not just helped Jonathan, but also the rest of the class. She feels she is a better teacher.

I asked what problems and issues need to be addressed. All three interviewees agreed that they wish they had more time. The monthly meeting was identified as a useful tool, but time consuming. They had no other complaints.

I also asked how inclusion could be improved. Again all three answered that everything was going very well. The most important ingredient for success is teamwork and communication. Teachers need to share ideas, share experiences, and support one another. Teachers also need to believe that what they are doing for the student is really what is best for him/her.

## Observation

As 9:00 am approached, the majority of the students entered the room. About 2 minutes before class was to begin Jonathan entered the room. As the students saw Jonathan, about 5 of them rushed over to see Jonathan and say hi. By the time the commotion had ended and class was ready to start, Jonathan said he had to use the bathroom. The teacher said that Jonathan had just started to say he needed to use the bathroom as school started and it was beginning to be a disruption.

Once Jonathan returned and the teacher finished answering student questions and taking attendance, the class stood for the Pledge of Allegiance. After the pledge Jonathan's buddy went over to Jonathan's desk. She took his lunch order and passed the information on to the lunch person.

The day started with a class activity in which a sentence is written on the board. This sentence has 4 or 5 grammatical errors in it. The students who know what is wrong with the sentence raise their hands to be called upon to correct the mistake at the board. Jonathan did not involve himself in this activity. Jonathan's buddy was involved, raising her hand on 3 or 4 occasions.

The next assignment was for the students to correct the homework assignment from the previous day. Each person was given someone else's assignment. Jonathan was responsible for correcting the paper he was given with help from his buddy. During the correcting of the papers Jonathan would mark answers right or wrong. There were a few entries that Jonathan missed. When Jonathan mismarked on the paper, his buddy would point out the oversight and make the correct mark on the paper. After this exercise the papers were collected and the teacher moved on to math.

For the math assignment Jonathan's buddy went back to her desk to do her work. At this time the inclusion specialist assumed the buddy's position. The teacher presented the assignment and answered questions from the students. After all the questions were answered the students were given a set of problems to do in class. Jonathan began the assignment with everyone else. Jonathan was dictating his answers to the inclusion specialist step by step as she wrote his responses down on his paper.

If Jonathan became stuck or made a mistake, the inclusion specialist would help him correct his mistake. This process continued for an hour. Toward the end of the hour Jonathan began to fall asleep. The inclusion specialist would gently wake him up. For the majority of the hour Jonathan seemed to be learning math.

### Analysis and Recommendations

When this class began and inclusion was introduced, I, like quite a few others in class, were skeptical. Through class discussions, videos, and readings I began to see the merit in inclusion. It is very difficult to understand something like inclusion that seems so radical, when in reality its success just comes down to cooperation, communication, and the courage to initiate change. I have limited experience with people with special needs, but what I took from that time was that my expectations were exceeded much more than not. Most of the time the only thing that held someone back from succeeding was an opportunity to succeed.

During my short visit to Mount Elizabeth Elementary I saw nothing that I would categorize as negative about inclusion. I was most impressed with the fact that everyone benefited from having Jonathan in class. The regular students were enthusiastic about being Jonathan's buddy for the day. The students were seen wiping the drool from Jonathan's mouth. I can not help but think that if a regular student had a runny nose or drool dripping from his mouth how much he would be ridiculed by his peers. These same peers are now not just accepting of this but taking the initiative to help. I believe the time these students get to spend with Jonathan will be something that they will remember the rest of their lives. Hopefully, they will now look at people with special needs with compassion and on the same plane as they are.

It was obvious during the interview that the teacher also grew professionally because of Jonathan. The teacher was unaware that she now gave more verbal and vocal clues during her teaching. This would also help the other students in the class learn.

My perception was that having the aide and inclusion specialist in the classroom all day would also help the teacher professionally. Educators have long been known to not communicate with other colleagues. Because of this, there is little exchange of ideas or growth among peers. Having someone in the classroom to share ideas with may start to break down the barriers impeding communication between teachers.

As I was thinking about the positive effects of inclusion for this paper, the last person I thought about was Jonathan. I think this is because, contrary to what I believed before, he just blended into the class like any other student. Defining what positive effect inclusion has on Jonathan is simple. He is challenged academically. He is growing socially. He is treated simply as everyone else is.

After the interview, I thought about why the use of different models in the school district. Students with special needs could be fully included, spend the whole day in a special education classroom, or they could be somewhere in between. The inclusion specialist told me that there are no future plans for moving to full inclusion for all special needs students. I think this is a step toward full inclusion, even if that is not what is intended. If inclusion is successful, I would think the district would make the commitment to full inclusion for everyone.

My recommendation for inclusion in this district is to get as many people involved as possible..to allow other teachers and administrators the chance to see inclusion work. I feel that if all the teachers and administrators saw what I did in just a short visit, an overwhelming majority of them would want to give it a try.

The classroom that I observed had a young teacher. I think the veteran teachers need to experience inclusion. If these teachers get behind the movement everyone else will follow. In addition to the veteran teachers' support, support from the union is paramount. How that will be accomplished, I do not know.

Overall I was impressed with the commitment to inclusion in this school. Everyone worked together for the benefit of all students. Hopefully the district will continue on this path.