

**INCLUSIVE SCHOOLING:
OBSERVATION & INTERVIEW**

Elementary School

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School X is a near suburb of a major city in a Mid-western state. The school is set back in a residential area away from the neighbors. Upon approaching the school, one would have difficulties finding it as School X is hidden behind trees located at the bottom of a slight gradient. I do not recall seeing a sign to tell me that this is school X, except on the main road. The only indication that I was approaching School X is the school children's crossing sign. The neighborhood surrounding the school gives the impression of being quiet, respectable, neat and middle class, without any of the visible problems commonly associated with low-income areas. The school has approximately 450 students, ranging from kindergarten to fifth grade, and mainstreams special needs pupils with regular students. Special needs is described as any of the following disabilities: blindness, deafness, autism, learning, speech and language, emotional, physical and health impairments, and mental retardation as defined by Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) passed in 1975 (Peterson, 26). A small number students in Ms. Z's class have different learning disabilities. For my report, I visited Ms. Z's multi-age first and second grade class on February 14, 2002 and February 28, 2002 to observe how students with special needs were mainstreamed into a regular school system, how they learn with their peers, and the accommodations made for them.

Ms. Z teaches a class of twenty-five first and second graders of different religions, cultures, and intelligence levels. The makeup of the class is that her students' ages range between seven and nine-years-old, and their ethnic backgrounds are mainly black or white, of an even distribution. It is not until speaking with Ms. Z that one learns of the complete breakdown of her students. Her students are Christians, including Jehovah Witness, Jews, Muslims, equal split of blacks and whites, a potential ADHD student, a bilingual student, a few gifted students, a student who has difficulties learning and comprehending, a student with speech and language disabilities, and a student who is a candidate for labeling, especially as he has older siblings who are already labeled. Ms. Z. explains that she has no student with any physical disabilities. As Ms. Z explains, "My students who are considered special needs have a learning disability and do not get tested until the third grade." She further goes on to inform me that, "Students at School X have until second grade to read. By then, any disability will become obvious to the teacher." The teacher also explains that by testing so late it prevents some students from being labeled, and sometimes the children, being around their peers, may themselves correct their

impairment. Ms. Z explains that it is the socialization around their peers that aids them.

Upon entering her classroom, you will not find any of the old school approaches to teaching. There is nothing traditional in the way the students are engaged in their activities. In Ms. Z's class you will find children with special needs working alongside regular students, and it is hard to identify them in the classroom, as they do not stick out like a sore thumb. You will not find rows of desks with students sitting quietly behind them, obediently doing their schoolwork or listening to the teacher, but you find the children working in groups in different areas of the classroom. The students utilize the classroom in finding an area that allows them to work to their best abilities.

The largest group can be found lying on the story-time carpet. Even this group is split into three subgroups. The classroom is noisy with students talking at various levels as well as working at different academic stages. It is not an annoying noise where a teacher begs the children to be quiet, but a joyous noise where students are encouraged to talk. When the noise level rises to a point that will affect the concentration of the students, Ms Z warmly and respectfully interjects, in an authoritative manner, with a question: "Why are we so loud today? Is any work being done?" The students immediately lower the level of their noise. It does not become deathly quiet but a low "hum" still remains (Peterson 235). You will find students self-disciplining themselves and ensuring that their neighbors comply with Ms. Z's instructions. The majority of their conversation, whether in pairs or in groups, is about their work interwoven with a small mixture of some personal news they want to share with their group or friends.

Trying to locate Ms. Z is the hardest part when you are new to her classroom. It takes me a few moments to find her, and when I do find her she is working with a student. Ms. Z does not occupy the traditional spot behind a typical teacher's desk, but she is seated slightly in front of it working one-on-one with a student. This teacher blends in with her classroom and as she calls them her "Minimacs." Before Ms. Z can say anything to me, a student greets me at the door, grabs one of my hands and whisks me off to the other end of the class to show me her work. The teacher does not tell her to leave me alone, but silently encourages her to keep me entertained.

Ms. Z does not rush the student she is working with to attend to me. She gives the student his allotted time—finishing off their one-on-one teaching session. I am not offended by her actions as I have time to observe students busily working—a few students are lying on the carpet, with clipboard, writing or illustrating their letters; another straggly group of four is seated around a table writing their daily newspaper report; and yet another group of children is choosing books from their library and reading on their own. Once Ms. Z. has finished with her student, she briefly attends to me to find out who I am and the reason for my presence in her classroom. Ms. Z apologizes to me for visiting on this particular day and the noise level: "I am sorry you choose today of all days to visit. The students are excited because they are making valentines, and we are not following our usual lessons today." The noise level does not bother me as I get the impression it is noisy every day. She immediately asks her class for "five," and spontaneously the hum is quietened and twenty-five hands are raised and waving five. Ms. Z introduces me to the class and asks them to recall that

Dr. Peterson, my professor, had visited the class recently. The students nod. She tells them I am here to observe and that they must show off their works. E is asked to show me what she is working on and Ms. Z. calls another child for a student/teacher session.

E, a Caucasian, tells and shows me that she is working on her letter to her friend who went to hospital to have stitches. I am amazed at the level of her writing for a nine-year old. She works at a third grade level. While E is attempting to monopolize my time, Ms. Z. sends B. over to me. B, a nine-year-old African American, introduces herself to me and takes me around the classroom, showing me the different learning areas and the various tools they use in their classroom. When we arrive at the math/language art area, B forgets showing me around the classroom, and begins to explain and demonstrate how the various math manipulative tools work. B and I line up dominoes and knock them, over causing a domino effect. She also explains and shows me how they use letter tiles to write sentences. B demonstrates making a sentence. The sentence is complex—joining two independent sentences with a conjunction, and she is able to identify a verb, a noun, and an adverb. Ms. Z has to gently remind B that she can show me her draft book and the work she is currently working on.

B leads me back to her table and shows me all her work from the beginning of the draft book, reading each story. B's academic level is also at a third or fourth-grade level. We are joined by D, who asks B if she has completed her *Itty Bitty book*, a thought for the day mini notepad. B says "No," as she does not have an answer to the question—What do you do after school? D and I volunteer some ideas to aid B in her thinking process. B gladly accepts our help and from our suggestions she formulates her own idea and writes down her one-line sentence, punctuated correctly and without a spelling mistake. As I look around at the groups working, I observe that Ms. Z's class does a lot of writing. The classroom walls and chalkboard are so saturated with flip sheet papers that you do not even get a glimpse of the wall. The only clear area is the long rectangular window in the left-hand corner. How that area escape plastering I do not know, but I suspect it too will be covered sooner or later.

Not only are Ms. Z's students busy, but also the classroom gives the impression of being hectic. This classroom does not have a clinical feeling like the old school image, but resembles a child's bedroom—every part of the room being covered. On the chalkboard hangs the classroom contract, created and signed by the children. It is displayed as a reminder to everyone. I am amazed that students as young as seven could discuss among their peers and devise such a document. To the right of the contract hangs another large sheet of paper with the day's topics or the subject for "What they need to know" discussion. When I visited on 2/28/02, the students and Ms. Z. were seated on the carpet engaged in a brainstorming session. The teacher asked her class what they knew about penguins and what they wanted to know. The replies ranged from, "penguins are black and white" to "they live in a cold climate." She feverishly writes down their replies on the white sheet, and, when the class has finished collating their answers she asks a student to hang it with the previous day's work. On the math side of the wall and part of the chalkboard graphs, adding charts hangs.

Above the teacher's main desk and on the wall, a colorful *Prediction and What is Happening* collage is displayed. To the right of the collage are three flip chart sheets displaying a brainstorming session about their knowledge of *Martin Luther King and what were his Civil Rights achievements*, and is part of their recognition and understanding of Black History Month. A white board easel stands just in front of the window and behind a bookshelf which has books arranged in title order. The board, too, has writing on it, and a magnetic board clip is affixed to the easel for groups to hang their edition of *The Daily News*. E's group of five students agrees to my joining them and reading their articles before submitting them to the easel.

I notice the varied academic levels of the group and their handwritings. E and another student J, who I later find out is a gifted student, seem to be the brightest of the group. My attention is quickly attuned to P, another group member. He is trying to explain to J why his piece has traveled into J's section of the newspaper. J expresses to the whole group that because of this he cannot possibly write and will have to forego submitting his contribution to the *Daily News*. Various members of the group explain to him that there is still enough space on the page for him. I try to interject by telling him he can write on the reverse side. This idea does not win J over, and he tells me, "Ms. Z may not allow me to write on the other side." He re-evaluates the situation and he writes his piece in the space left. I understand finally why he was fussing, as he writes a few sentences about an upcoming event he is looking forward to with his father, the number of days he has to wait, and how he is excited. I observe that his writing is readable and is written neatly, unlike S, a different member of the group, who writes big with the letters running into each other. I have a hard time reading his piece, and I am grateful when during the class greeting time Ms. Z reads it to the class.

While E's group is congregated around a desk, near the story-time area, I observe the other activities that are going in this area. The story-time area is a large area almost a quarter of the classroom and is covered with carpet and large interlocking sponge alphabet tiles. Around this area is a long shelf that extends the length of the wall, at the students' waist height, with more books and below the shelf are books that previous students have created, like their own concept book about a visit to an apple orchard. Some students, in pairs, who have completed the various assigned tasks are reading these books as well as books from the mobile library.

My attention turns to the students' desks and how they are arranged in clusters around the teacher/student conference desk. All the desks in Ms. Z's classroom are overflowing with personal and school materials. On the students' desks you will find pencil boxes, draft and Itty-Bitty books, pencils, boxes of tissues, adorning the students' tables as well are hand sanitizers. The chairs are covered with their coats and underneath the table are the shoes, of those who choose to walk around in their socks. Ms. Z's desk is the same, stacked high with materials and student works hiding a computer. There is not a clear desk in her classroom. The student/teacher conference desk does not escape. It has students' works that need to be typed, and materials they are working on. If one looks carefully, one will eventually find Ms. Z helping a student with spellings.

A visitor may begin to ask how any teaching or learning occurs in this non-traditional setting. To understand inclusive schooling, a person must be open-

mindful to the concept. Its aim is to include all children who are educable and trainable, including those with special needs. It does not believe in segregating or labeling children with special needs. The goals of inclusive teaching are to include the students as part of the school community (Peterson 59). It is in the classroom where the barriers of segregation and labeling can be broken. The classroom is where social interaction is foremost and is often considered the first home to some children. Here children learn not only academic subjects, but also how to socialize with their peers, who are all diverse. The teacher is an extension of the first trainer—parent—in the education process.

Ms. Z's approach to inclusive teaching is a two-fold method: multi-age and multi-level. She has to incorporate into her teaching practices the various levels of intelligence, and challenge each student's ability while working with other students of other abilities (Peterson 243). No two children are alike in their learning. What will work for one student will not work for another. Ms. Z explains the class motto: "You get what you need." This is especially true in comparing her special needs children. They are not treated any differently from the rest of their classmates. She does not single them out in the classroom, by comparing their academic level to those who are brighter. Nor are they collected at any time during the school hours to attend session with a special education teacher. There is no special needs teacher, parent volunteer, or a paraprofessional in the classroom. Ms. Z is the only teacher in the classroom. She does not use the traditional approach to learning whereby all students, in spite of their differing academic levels, must all reach the same stage of learning. The old approach to learning ensures failure, in many cases, and turns some students away from learning or makes them afraid to learn. Inclusive schooling, as Ms. Z. explains, encourages student to learn. They no longer have to compete with their classmates but strive to exceed their own level of learning. A is an example of a student who exceeds his level of expectation. While he comes from a family with a history of special needs and his reading level includes mainly two and three letter words—*my, day*—he fared better than Ms. Z. thought he would on the recent I.Q. tests, but not enough to prevent his being labeled. Ms. Z. had monitored A's progress, from the start of the school year, and had observed that his reading and written work does not reflect any progress being made, but it was obvious from the tests that he is learning.

While inclusive schooling primarily deals with educating all students in a regular school environment, it is multi-level teaching that challenges each child's abilities and moves them onto the next level of his or her development. Ms. Z. points out that she "wholeheartedly enjoys this method of teaching and will fight to prevent School X from phasing it out." Even her students voice the same feeling. As M. states, "It is fun, and you learn a lot." There is, however, a downside to multi-level teaching. The only students who have a difficult time with this method of learning are the gifted students. I am surprised by this comment, as I had perceived gifted students as having no problems at all. As Ms. Z. explains, "They are so used to getting good marks that they do not feel they have put as much work into their tasks. They know that they will get a good grade." Multi-level teaching forces her gifted students to be responsible and makes them aware that they cannot do mediocre work and get away with it.

“The range of the tasks is set just beyond a student’s present level of ability that he or she cannot yet perform independently, but can . . . with the help and guidance of others” (Peterson 245). Students, therefore, will require either Ms. Z’s or their peers help and support in accomplishing the tasks. The teacher is able to monitor a student’s progress through various written reports, the use of computers, and individual reading. A few of the strategies in multi-level teaching are:

- Individual reading, writing and spelling conferences

Frequently during my observation, I notice students meeting with Ms. Z for their student/teacher conferencing. She reviews their writings in their draft book and assists them in correcting any misspelled words. In their spelling workbook, in which each page is torn in half, she lists the words the child gets wrong. The student has to take their list of words home and study it for the next day. Ms. Z. does not have a standard spelling list like the traditional approach. The students develop their own spelling lists, and it will be according to the students’ academic level or their need to know. For example, B and J, who are both nine, are able to spell words like *yesterday* and *enough*. Whereas S, who is also nine, can simply spell words like *now* and *day*. The class also does group spelling during their greeting time. Students are called in turn, depending upon a group’s color, to pick a word from their own spelling list and to choose a classmate who they think can spell the word. This enables the class to be familiar with the word and aids them in spelling the word when they need to use it.

- Journals

The students do write journals every day, but they either work on gathering ideas for a new story, or finish drafting a story that they have in progress. Students not only write in their draft books, but also illustrate them. P draws his story of *The Flying Paper*, and is able from his pictures to tell me the story. The works from the draft books will either be turned into a greeting letter, which Ms. Z will type on her computer, exactly as the child has written them but with the correct spellings, or the story would be turned into a book which each student created and illustrated. These publishing books are kept in their reading box, along with their reading books. Each child thinks of his or her own story idea and develops it, ensuring that there is a beginning, middle, and an end to the story. Ms. Z asks a variety of questions at the start of the workshop—*Have you finished illustrating? What are you writing your new story about? How far are you in writing your story, and are you ready for me to print your story?* She notes each child’s status of their work on a chart. Ms. Z. points out that the length of the story will depend on the level of the child’s intelligence. I saw students who would write and illustrate a story in as little as three pages. D, a regular student, is working on a story that is forty pages long. Ms. Z, tells me

that, “Each day I have to read a page of D’s story. That is forty days of the same story.”

- Individual Reading

It is only emergent students have designated reading books. Non-emergent readers can choose any book to read, whether fiction or concepts. I am amazed that the majority of students who show their works to me are reading concept books directed at their reading level. Even G., who is not an emergent reader, is reading a concept book about how different everyday objects look under a microscope. He has a speech and language problem with his own native language and is classed as special needs. I could not tell that he has an impairment. I did notice when he is reading that he mixes words and sounds words like “look” as “luck.” As I inform Ms. Z during our interview, once I told him to slow down and take his time, he reads like any of his peers.

- Computer aids in reading

There are four student computers in the classroom, each equipped with headphones so as not to disturb other students while reading. S and I play a game of “Playmobil,” a matching game to aid students with their concentration. S, who is labeled speech impaired, had no trouble in matching the cards in seventy-eight tries. During the course of three games, I do not detect any speech problem and understand her clearly, especially when she is explaining the game to me (Peterson 248).

Ms. Z. monitors each student’s progress through the various tasks that she employs in the classroom. She is able to show during Parent/Teacher Conference how the child has progressed by encouraging students to build their own portfolios. The portfolio is updated every three months and reflects the student’s works. Each student is responsible for choosing his or her best work in math and language arts, and picking the hardest book, which they can read well, from their reading box. At Parent/Teacher Conference, the parents can see their child’s progress, and make comparison with different quarters of the student’s year.

Inclusive teaching not only involves the teacher, but also the students. Ms. Z. opens the discussion by asking her students if they have any questions they would like to ask me. This approach shows me that they are happy to use me “as a resource,” and they probably consider me as part of their community (Peterson 235). Their questions are “warm, genuine, and respectful” (Peterson 235). Their questions range from whether I have any children to what is my favorite book. When I said *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*, the class squeals with delight, acknowledging that they had heard of this book. Then Ms. Z. suggests that they tell me of their thoughts of multi-age learning. Immediately, three-quarters of the students’ hands shoot up in the air waving and begging me to pick them. The replies are: *You get to help each other. The younger children can help the older children, and vice versa. It is fun. You can read at any time.* None of the students say that the brighter students

help the not-so-bright students. The students may or may not be aware of the different academic levels or of any learning disabilities that their peers possess, but it is never expressed. As far as they are concerned, they are all the same, in spite of their backgrounds or impairments.

Ms. Z. explains that the first graders who have had her as a teacher and are assigned to her for the next grade are eager to get to class because they have so much fun and cannot wait to learn. Plus, their parents tell Ms. Z that their child cannot wait to return to school after the summer break. Ms. Z's room is clearly a community within a classroom, where students and teacher have "created a place of beauty, peace, and fun," and there is equal say in the running of the room (Peterson 67). Everyone's opinion is valued, and no child is made to feel different.

As I left Ms. Z's class, I wondered why a multi-level program was being phased out, and why more schools had not opted to do inclusive schooling. I thought maybe there are insufficient numbers of teachers capable or willing to undertake multi-level and inclusive teachings. Here is a school where everyone has fun learning, and teaching is tailored to the individual. Ms. Z's class produces a higher percentage of bright students than in traditional classrooms, because each student exceeds his or her own learning level. There is a sense of pride when a child moves onto the next level of their learning. No child is a failure in this class, regardless of his or her background. My recommendations are:

1. A bigger classroom as Ms. Z. may have a child who is physically disabled and can only move around in a wheelchair.
2. Clothes hooks—so that students had a place to hang their belongings. I noticed that one or two children did trip over lying coats and shoes.
3. To keep multi-age and multi-intelligence teaching at least until grade eight. This was also Ms. Z's suggestion, and I agree with her!
4. To train more teachers for multi-level teaching.

References

Peterson, Michael. & Hittie, Mishael. (2003). Inclusive Teaching: Creating Effective Schools for all Learners. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.