

Inclusive Schooling Observation

“Elementary W”

Teachers
Special Education Teacher
General Education 2nd grade

Staff Interviewed
Principal
Paraprofessionals:

Student: Jamila



Catherine Croft

Inclusive Schooling Observation

Background Information

Elementary W. School is located in a middle to upper middle class suburb of a large metropolitan city in the Great Lakes area of the United States. Although this school is located in this community, it is not as affluent as the rest of the city. It is one of 15 elementary schools in the district and services students from kindergarten to grade five, with the average class having 22 students.

The majority of the students in the school come from working blue-collar homes. Two parent households are the norm in the area, however it is not uncommon to have single parent households.

Elementary W's is home to 245 students, with 80% of the students coming from Anglo-Saxon Christian backgrounds. The remaining 20% are comprised of Black Americans, Jewish Americans, Asian Americans, Middle Eastern Americans and students with multiracial backgrounds. Elementary W. is also home to students from various counties throughout the world. First generation Americans and immigrants from Russia, Albania, various Middle Eastern Countries, and the Marshall Islands are just some of the diverse groups represented at Elementary W.

The school building appears too typical of the elementary schools built in the mid to late fifties. It is a one-story building that has several doors leading into a main hallway. The main office is located on this corridor along with several classrooms. Two major hallways branch off this hall connecting with a parallel back hallway. This design creates a large center courtyard, allowing for all classes to have windows.

The teachers and staff at Elementary W. appeared to be a diverse group in regards to age. The school principle appeared to be in his early thirties. While the teachers seemed to range in age from their mid twenties to mid to late fifties. The racial background of the teachers seemed to reflect the student population.

Elementary W. has had special education classes since the school opened in 1955. Three special education options are currently offered at the school. There is a resource room, learning center and a classroom for severely multiple impaired students.

The Resource Room currently offers services for 15 students in the school. It services children that are diagnosed ADHD and learning disabled. The students spend the majority of their day in their regular classes and come to the Resource Room part of the day to obtain individual assistance where needed. The staff consists of one certified teacher, three literacy paraprofessionals, and one bilingual paraprofessional that speaks Arabic.

The Learning Center is a program that provides services for the entire school. Any student that is having difficulty in a particular subject can be referred to the learning center. The students come once or twice a week in 25-minute time blocks to the learning center. They receive instruction in small groups to address the areas in which they are having difficulty. The staff consists of one certified teacher and one paraprofessional. The Learning Center teacher is also the Reading Recovery teacher. She provides additional support to students who are experiencing reading difficulties.

The remaining special education class offered at Elementary W is for severely multiply impaired students. I observed this program during my visit. This class of nine students is housed in the center of the school and is a Center Based Program for Oakland County. Students from neighboring school districts that do not have classes for severely multiply impaired (SXI) students send their students to Elementary W. for classes. Transportation costs for each student is paid for by the student's home school district.

The staff consists of one special education teacher and four paraprofessionals. The Special Education teacher works with all of the students in his classroom and in the regular classes as well. The paraprofessionals attend to the student's physical, educational, and emotional needs. They are assigned to one or two students assisting them in the SXI class as well as the general education class. Additionally, they assist with other students in the SXI classroom as needed.

The students spend part of their day in the special education classroom and part of their day in the regular education classes. They attend the same regular education class on a daily basis and are in the class a minimum of two hours per day. In addition to working with the special needs student the paraprofessional also works with the other students in the class. According to the special education teacher, this helps to offset the expense of the program, as the entire school benefits from the services.

Interviews and Observation Process

I observed a second grade class at Elementary W on September 27, 2001. Elementary W is a traditional elementary school, in that they follow a set schedule daily. The primary grades remain in a self-contained classroom, traveling to special classes three times weekly. While the upper grades spend half of their day in a language arts/homeroom and the remaining day is spent in content area classes.

Upon entering the school, I spoke to the school principal, who assisted in providing some of the background information on the school and the program. I spoke with him in his office and in the hallway at the school. He has been principal of Elementary W. for two years. Before coming to Elementary W., he was a fifth grade teacher at another school in

the district. The principal states that he is very pleased with how special education services are provided at Elementary W.

I also spoke with the school secretary in the main office. She states the special education program runs smoothly and that all of her interactions with the parents have been quite positive. She assisted in providing statistical information for this report.

I was escorted down one of the center halls to the SXI classroom, by the school principal. Upon entering the room, I was introduced to the paraprofessionals in the class. The classroom was brightly lit, with colorful posters on beige cinder block walls. The students are seated around a half circle table in chairs or in their wheelchairs. Upon entering the class, the students began speaking and gesturing in my direction. The staff was quite friendly and introduced me to each of the children in the class.

The paraprofessionals provided me with basic information regarding the children, such as age, grade, and classes they were assigned to beyond the SXI classroom. They were also able to provide general background information regarding each child's ability and medical condition.

It was at this point that the special education teacher entered the classroom and was introduced to me. He outlined the program and how the children were integrated into the general education classroom. He also provided a brief summary on each student and stated that the student he had planned for me to observe was absent that day. Instead, I would be observing a female second grade who student, she was born with cerebral palsy, she has limited speech (four words) and spends approximately 3 hours a day in the general second grade classroom.

Observation and Interviews

The second grade classroom in which I observed the SXI student was rectangular. The entry door to the classroom was located in the middle of one of the long sides. The wall directly opposite this wall was covered with five large windows, which had white bookcases located under the windows. Four computers were placed in front of the bookcases with small student chairs in front of each computer. The windows were covered with off white vertical blinds, which were open to allow sunlight to enter the room. The bookcases housed textbooks, however they were not filled to capacity and were inaccessible due to the placement of the computers.

Although the room was rectangular in shape the wall on the entry side extended slightly into the classroom halfway along the wall. This creates an alcove that the teacher uses for her desk and as a work area. The walls in this area are covered with student artwork, a calendar and assorted teacher memos. There are several large bookcases and file cabinets in this area filled with resource materials for the teacher.

In the front of the class room along one of the short walls is a large white dry erase board. The actual work area of the board is quite small as the board had poster, graphs, and assorted student work placed on each side of the board. The teacher uses this board to list activities and outline lessons.

The student work area is also in this part of the classroom. Each student has an individual desk that is group next to several other desks. The desk arrangement appears to be in the shape of horseshoe with a single row of desk in front and on the side of the main area. The students appear to work on most assignments in groups or with a partner.

In the back of the classroom is an open area in which a half circle table is placed. Small student chairs are place around the table. On the opposite side of the table is a larger chair in which an adult could sit to conduct small group activities. There are several small bookcases along the wall in this section of the classroom. The bookcases are filled with children literature that can be read during free time. On top of the bookcases are mailboxes for each student. Parent notes, letters and returned class work is placed in the boxes for each student to take home at the end of the day. Red and blue beanbag chairs are placed near the bookcase, welcoming students to sit down and read.

Large bulletin boards are placed around the classroom. Current classroom themes and student work is displayed on these boards. Computer generated math graphs were placed on one board, denoting the use of computers as well as math benchmarks that are being explored.

The class has 10 boys and 12 girls, for a total of 22 students. This class appears to reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the school. There are four black students, one Asian student, and one multiracial student. The remaining 16 students appear to be of European decent.

Upon entering the classroom, the teacher was collecting the papers on the lesson the students had just finished. The SXI student was wheeled in by the paraprofessional and placed next teacher's desk. The teacher continued to collect the papers and did not acknowledge the SXI student's presence in the room.

After collecting the papers, directions were given for the next assignment. The students were directed to finish the worksheet and project that they had been given earlier in the week. The worksheet appeared to be a language arts lesson in which the children had to color and place in order facts from a story. The project consisted of the students drawing several pictures of their favorite part of a story that had been read earlier in the week. The teacher then went to her desk and begun working with some papers. It was at this point the SXI student was wheeled to the open area in the back of the class near the small table.

The paraprofessional gathered several children around the SXI student and began assisting them in working on their project and worksheet. The students also made an attempt to include the SXI student by asking her questions. She would respond or gesture toward the other students, however she usually said “hi” or waved at them. The students would then begin writing on the SXI student’s paper an attempt to include her in the activity. After a brief period, the students began to sit at the small table or on the floor near the SXI student and complete their own work.

At this point, the classroom teacher began walking around the room observing the students’ progress and seeing if they were on task. Students would also walk up to her and request assistance as needed. The atmosphere of the classroom was very casual. Students would walk around the class, change seats and sharpen their pencils at will. It appeared that the students were completing their assignment, as the teacher only had to stop and redirect the class on one occasion during the entire observation.

After being in the classroom for approximately 30 minutes the special education teacher came into the room. After speaking to the paraprofessional and the SXI student briefly, he then went over to the classroom teacher. After a brief discussion he then went over to the computers and began to download information off a disk into the computers. He explained to me that he needed to get this information into the computers for this teacher as soon as possible, so that she could use the programs with her class.

During this time the SXI student was sitting in her chair and looking around the classroom. Although the classroom students were “helping” her with her class work she appeared to be indifferent to the students and the assignment. The paraprofessional was helping all of the students near her.

As the regular education teacher continued to walk around the class and the special education teacher continued to work with the computers, the SXI student just looked around. This was despite the efforts of the other students and paraprofessional to engage her into the classroom activity. After several minutes, the special education teacher began to talk with me about his role in the class and what the students in the classroom were attempting with the SXI student.

Once again I noted that the SXI student seem to be more interested in the class and looking at the other students walking about than the students and the paraprofessional working with her. I also noted the classroom teacher did not acknowledge the SXI student’s presence or attempt to assist her with her class work. The aforementioned pattern of behavior continued during the entire hour and half that I spent in the classroom.

During the course of the observation, the SXI student needed to go to the restroom. The paraprofessional took the student out of the class without the classroom or special education teacher noticing. I noticed that she was being wheeled out of the class and when I ask the special education teacher where she was going, he stated he was not sure,

but assumed it was to the restroom. I remained in the class another 10 minutes and the special education teacher decided that we should see where the student was and if she would be returning shortly. We located her in the hallway and found that she did indeed need to go to the restroom. The paraprofessional was elated that the student had indicated that she needed to go to the restroom. She did this by pointing to a single card, that depicted a restroom on the tray of her wheelchair. She also stated that the student would be returning to the SXI classroom for the remainder of the morning and would join her general education class later in the day.

Analysis and Recommendations

1. What types of students are included in the class?

The second grade class that I observed contained 10 boys and 12 girls, for a total of 22 students. The class reflected the racial and ethnic composition of the school and district. Sixteen of the students appeared to be of European decent, one Asian American student, four multiracial Black American students, and one multiracial student. Only one student was identified as having immigrated to the United States, however, several were identified as first generation Americans.

2. What is the approach the instruction in the class?

The teachers uses lecture, group projects, hands on activities, models and audio/visual equipment to assist the students in grasping the information presented. It appears that many lessons are presented in lecture form and the students are given worksheets or projects to complete in conjunction with the lesson that was presented. Additional materials, such as charts, videos, and classmate partnerships are also used to maintain student interest.

Cooperative learning seems to be the style that is most often used in the class. According to the special education teacher, the students are more motivated and enthusiastic about the materials when they work together.

3. What is the physical layout and design of the class? How is the space used?

The rectangular shape of the room provided the need space in the class. This allows for a student work area, as well as an open space section in the back of the class. This in turn allows for large group actives, small group instruction and/or project completion. Notwithstanding any specialized equipment, that a student may use could be accommodated in this area of the class.

The room was accessible for all students, as the doorway was large enough for a wheelchair and other equipment a student may need. The outside aisle in the classroom was large enough for a wheelchair to pass through without any problems.

4. *What is the approach to building community and dealing with behavioral problems in the class?*

In the general education class, the rules and consequences are posted. It appears that the teacher allows the students freedom to move about the class, as long as it does not interfere with the lessons being presented. Moreover, it seems to encourage responsibility and self-control among the students. According to the special education teacher and the school principal, there is not any outstanding behavior problems in the classroom. The most common problem sited was failure to complete class work and listening to directions. The students are often redirected or given a timeout if needed. Parents are called if the behavior continues, but calls are seldom placed.

The SXI students are also held to the same rules as the general education students, however standardized programs do not always work with them. Therefore alternative means are developed. A menu of choice, contracts, adjustment in the environment (sensory problems) are just but a few of the way behavior is handled in the class. Notwithstanding, a student's medical condition is always paramount when handling any behavior difficulties, as it may be medically based.

5. *What support is provided to the teacher in working with students with special need?*

The general education teacher has the use of a paraprofessional in her class when the special needs student is in the room. The paraprofessional not only works with the special needs student but the entire class as well. Furthermore, the special education *teacher* assists in the classroom as well. Not only does he provide services for the special education student, but also provides them for the other students as well. In this classroom, he was installing a program on the computers that would be beneficial not only to he SXI student but to all of the students in the classroom as well.

Additionally, the principal stated that he often tries to provide an extra planning period to the general education teacher when it is available. This is to allow for additional planning that may be needed to accommodate the special education student.

The speech therapist, physical therapist, and occupational therapist work with the student outside of the general education classroom. Since the majority of the SXI students are only in a general education classroom part of the day it does not interfere with the activity in the regular classroom.

6. *How effective is the mainstreaming/inclusive education process? for special students? for the regular students? for teachers ?*

According to the special education integration is the goal. He felt that this was a major change in providing services to special needs students. Moreover, he felt that this improvement was effective and helped the children feel at home. The children he said make friends in the community and know others when school is not in session.

According to the principal, not all of the teachers are so eager to embrace inclusion. Although, they see some merit in the program, they are concerned on how it will affect their class as a whole.

Overall, I can agree with his statement. However, I wonder how effective it truly is when the student is unable to communicate with the other students in the class. I believe that realistic expectations should be set for each child and children should not be asked to give feedback on a project when they are unable to communicate. I can see eating lunch together, attending music class, gym class etc.... Nevertheless, is it fair to ask a child who cannot point to the only picture on her tray (to ask for the bathroom) to tell you what they liked in a story? I think the activities and classes should reflect what a child is able to do. No, I am not saying place someone in a box and not strive for higher goals. I am just saying let us look at the physical abilities and work from there.

7. *What issues and problems exist? How could education of all student learning together be made better?*

Although the students seem to be very accepting of the special needs students in their class, there is major opposition from the community. Many parents and community members feel that inclusive education is too expensive and believe that it is a drain on the public school system. However the special education teacher and the principal feel just the opposite. They feel that the program enhances the general education program.

First students are exposed to others with varied learning abilities. This is a life skill that will help them throughout their lives, as they will encounter others different from them. By being exposed to a variety of students the general education student will learn that all people are valuable and have something to offer.

Secondly, the expertise of the special education teacher can be used in the general education classroom. The lessons are enhanced and not only does the enhancements assist the special needs student in grasping the material, it also can help general education students with understanding. The old cliché “two heads are better than one” is definitely applicable in this case.

Lastly, the paraprofessional used in the class not only enhances the special education students learning experience, but that of the entire class as well. Not only can they assist

that student, but other students as well, in addition to the classroom teacher. Overall, this can be viewed as a win win situation.

Currently, there is a mileage before the voters in Oakland County. According to the special education teacher this could be problematic for the program if it does not pass. Funding from the community as a whole is needed to make the program work and if it is viewed as too big an expenditure then the mileage may not pass. The entire community and county must accept responsibility for the education and inclusion of all students. As long as students with special needs are seen as, someone else's problem, cost will always be an issue.