

**INCLUSIVE SCHOOLING STUDY
INDIVIDUAL OBSERVATION**

SCHOOL 1
Greater Hamilton North HS
Assistant Principal
Speech and Language Pathologist

SCHOOL 2
Greater Hamilton South HS
General and special education co-teachers
Special education - autism teacher

Laurie League
June 3, 2002

Inclusive Schooling Study It's All About the Attitude

The school district discussed below is entirely segregated. Each school houses a different type of disability. Those with mental impairment go to one school. Those with autism are housed at another school. This remains true through high school also. If someone with autism lives on the west side of the district but the autism classes are on the east side, then they are bused across the district. This district is one of the few districts that do not provide busing for their general education students. Busing is the bone that is tossed to parents to pacify them while their children are segregated across district. There are two high schools within the school district. I will refer to them as School 1 and School 2 from now on.

School 1

When I contacted this school, the principal told me that it would be necessary, before agreeing to allow me into the classroom, to “check me out because they could not just let anyone into the classroom” (her words exactly.) I explained that I had a letter of intent from my professor and she put me in touch with the assistant principal. Though the principal had not directly communicated my purpose, the assistant principal laughed when I explained why I had been referred to him and said the only pre-requisite for my coming into the school, was that I be “warm and breathing.” He laughed again and said, “anyone who is interested in special education is alright by me. I guess you ‘check out!’”

The assistant principal is a very pleasant man who seemingly is supportive of inclusion within his school. I did find out, through the grapevine, that he has a special needs child himself. He told me that he has three rooms, currently, that are “inclusive” and is planning on ten for the next school year.

The assistant principal really went out of his way to make me feel welcome and to assist in any way that he could. On the day of my observation, he put me in touch with a teacher who is the speech/language specialist. She was very pleasant and took the entire morning to give me a tour of the school. The rooms are divided as follows:

DLP (Developmental Learning Program)

This is a self contained TMI (Trainable Mental Impairment) classroom. The students were seated at individual tables placed approximately 3-4 feet apart and had no direct interaction with each other. Several that were more verbal would make comments about occurrences in the classroom, but not necessarily directed to another student.

The main teacher for the room was out on sick leave so they had a permanent substitute. There were ten students with one teacher and two aides which now had the titles of “instructional assistants.” This was the new buzz term within the system.

As I found in other special education classrooms in the past, there was a lot of extracurricular chatting that occurred among the staff. They spoke more with each other than directly speaking to the students. The morning consisted of gift opening of presents that came from one of the students, to the staff, as a result of a recent camp outing. I did not observe any true teaching during the entire morning. The students merely sat at their desks. One paged through a magazine, one sat in a corner and rocked in a chair (apparently this soothed him), one had a deck of cards (perhaps Pokemon or something of

that sort) and the others sat at tables without anything in front of them to work on or to stimulate them.

I did ask about the routine and I was told that the students go out once a month (only) for community based instruction. When I asked for the definition of this, I was told that they would go to the mall and walk around. At Christmas they go to see Santa (these students were all at least 15 years old) and then they go with a shopping list and money provided by their parents to do their Christmas shopping. These students receive a certificate of completion when they leave the program instead of a high school diploma. It reminded me of the honorable mention awards that are given out on field days to pacify the non-ribbon earning, remaining participants of a competition.

I asked about interaction with the general education students and the teacher basically stated there was not any. These students eat separately, they pass in the halls at a separate time, and they have separate gym time. All of their classes are self-contained. When I questioned this, the speech teacher said it was “for their own protection and well-being.” She felt that separating the children from the general education population was necessary and helped to prevent outbursts. She said that the exposure to the real world was “just too much for them to handle.” I was in this room for about an hour and then left to tour the remaining rooms.

Upon returning, I found out that one of the students had apparently become violent for “no apparent reason at all” and the staff called her mother to pick her up. The mother sent her boyfriend who was very tall and intimidating man. They were leaving as I came back into the room and the entire focus of all staff was on this child leaving, not any other academia. After they left, one teacher kept saying “please, just don’t hit her, just don’t hit her” loudly to no one in particular. The other students were eating popcorn at their individual desks observing all of the commotion. The staff discussed openly all that had occurred while the students sat there. Again, I was in the room for approximately another hour. I found this room to be unsettling, non-stimulating for academics and depressing.

Adjusted Learning Program

This self-contained classroom consisted of a combination of students that are TMI, EMI, POHI and even one LD student. One half of the day is spent in academics and the other half is spent in vocational work. The academics consist of English, Math and civics. The English curriculum uses adapted classic novels. Math is geared towards vocational math by doing work such as maintaining a checkbook, where the students are given 9 problems each day that deal with crediting, debiting and balancing the account. The afternoon is spent doing vocational work in which the students do crafts that can be sold within the school store and there are a couple of students who go out into the community to work at local businesses. The teacher as well as another woman, who was in the school store, proudly explained how the students that worked in the store were able to be with the general education classes when working in the store. The quality of this social interaction would not seem to be one of great depth.

By this point, I was wondering where the “inclusion” that I was to observe fit into the program and it was explained to me, “these students pass to other classes at the same time as the general education students.” Therefore the inclusion was that the students were “included” in the hallway. I had a hard time biting my tongue hard enough to keep my mouth shut. The other classes that these students were inclusively involved in were

Foods for Fitness, Art and Gym. My tour guide also said that the students “could eat with the other general education students, but normally chose not to.” I would imagine if they were not encouraged, they would not tend to join in the other group. I have my doubts that these students developed deep friendships while passing the other students in the hallway.

The age range of this classroom was as young as 13 with the norm being 15 and then leaving the program at 21 or 22. There were 18 students currently on the caseload with 15 of these being involved in the “core curriculum” and the others out on a Community Based Instruction program. Some of these students live in apartments, and are supervised collectively by a group of cooperative parents. The students who graduate from this program receive a Special Education Diploma.

Learning Resource Center

This room consisted of students who had an IEP and who mainly had learning disabilities. I asked if general education students could come to the room for help. The speech teacher explained that students without an IEP are not allowed in the room to obtain help. When I asked where the general education students went for extra help, I was told they basically had to hire tutors. There are four teachers within the room and four “instructional assistants.” The students within this room are “fully included” in the regular classroom and then have one to two hours per day to spend getting help on their homework. I observed instructors actually doing the work for these students and as the speech teacher told me, “Sometimes that’s the way these teachers manage to get these kids to graduate.” The students from this room each graduate with a high school diploma.

School 2

This high school was the first school to return my phone call when inquiring about observations. I had originally called five schools. One called me back after a week, the school I will discuss next called me back the next day and this school called me back within two hours. The remaining schools never bothered to return my calls.

I later found out that the principal used to be at another high school that practiced inclusion. Though I never spoke directly to him, he had a special education teacher call me back, which she did and no mention was ever made of “checking me out.” She, in fact, arranged for me to go directly into an English class.

The English class that I observed was really interesting. I arrived, just as the bell was ringing and the two teachers, whom I had not met previously, were going over general business with the students. They introduced themselves by name and then introduced me to the class. Then, the female teacher explained they were reading, To Kill a Mockingbird. The other teacher handed a book to me so that I could follow along with the discussion. One of the students raised her hand and asked if she could “explain what the story was about” to me. Both teachers encouraged her and, blurtingly, she began to tell the story, then suddenly stopped and said, “I’m all embarrassed.” I replied, “You’re doing just fine, go on.” She hesitated, then finished, and sat smiling proudly at all of us.

The class then proceeded with their discussion and I sat and tried to figure out which teacher was the SED instructor and which was the general education teacher. I was unable to do so. They each taught equally and geared their attention toward all students within the class. I also scrutinized the students and gradually picked out several who had physical disabilities and behaviors. No one seemed obviously impaired and the teachers explained after class that these students were the “higher functioning LD, EI and POHI students.”

After class, both teachers willingly spoke of their involvement in this class as well as another that they collaboratively taught. It was evident that both teachers were respectful of each other both on a personal as well as professional level. There was no feeling of hierarchy within the teaching environment and it was evident that they had each other’s total cooperation in the efforts of the classroom.

The class consisted of 50% students with disabilities. All students do the same homework and both teachers said that only when it came to assessment did they consider the student’s ability. Here they would modify a grade based on whether they felt the student had done his or her best work. I did not sense any resentment among the students and when I asked the teachers they both said that these students “look out for one another.” They continued by saying “they were very protective of one another.” The respectful atmosphere permeated the members of the room.

This class had me very interested and excited about the prospect of what could happen in an inclusive environment. I contacted the woman who had set up this observation to thank her and she mentioned that she co-taught a civics class. I asked if I might be able to observe the class and she was receptive. This class was like night to the other class’ day.

When I arrived at the classroom, there was a teacher sitting at a teacher’s desk at the front of the room while the other teacher lectured from in front of the desk. I took a seat in the back. The desk to my left was empty but had books on top as though someone had been there. The student arrived about 5 minutes later by walking into the room during the teacher’s instructions. He looked at me and loudly asked, “Who are you??” The teacher ignored him and I was a bit uncomfortable about interrupting her classroom so I said nothing. The boy, still standing, announced loudly again “Who are you??” Hoping to pacify him, I said “I’m Mrs. League,” and then motioned toward his teacher. He then asked, “Do I know you??” I smiled, and said, “You do now, because I just introduced myself.” He replied, “Why are you here??”

Looking to crawl under the desk at this point, I was amazed that the teacher did not redirect him. She continued to speak as other students were now turning around to see, indeed, who I was. The boy then demanded, “Why are you here??” I replied, “I’m here from Wayne State for an observation.” He asked, “What are you observing??” “Your teachers,” I replied. He then turned towards me and said, “You’re not here to observe me??” I shook my head, no and he then turned to the teacher, apparently having lost interest in me.

This definitely had different dynamics from the first classroom. The teacher who had been sitting at the front desk came and sat at my right. The students surrounding me all turned to her and she motioned them to pay attention to what was going on up front. I suddenly realized that this group, in the back of the room, was the special education students.

When the teacher would ask a question, they would turn to the teacher to my right. She would tell them to raise their hand and direct them through whatever was to be done next. The students would miss a point that the teacher was making, ask for clarification and she would ignore them.

After class, I spoke with both teachers and asked how they managed their room. They said they had been working together for 3 or 4 years and it took teachers who were matched in philosophy in order for cooperative teaching to be successful.” They said at the end of the year they always got together and reflected on the year to see what worked and what did not. From here they would plan ahead and adjust their class accordingly.

The special education teacher said she never taught, but instead only managed her group and let the other teacher teach. She said she had far too much work involving IEP’s, METS, etc. to take the time to work on lesson plans. The other teacher nodded in agreement and said if “THEY (meaning the administration) didn’t reduce her (the SED teacher) workload, it just was not realistic for to be expected to help in the planning of the assignments.” I was also told that the general education teacher graded “everything.”

They also said they make no accommodations to the work that the students do but more so they make accommodations in testing by sometimes reading the test to some of the students in another room. Interestingly enough, 60% of the class had disabilities. These students were the “lower functioning” LD, POHI and EI students.

As I questioned the teacher’s further, I had the feeling that they were merely putting up with this idea of inclusion. When I asked how it was that they came to teach this class, the general education teacher said, “I was the only one who would do it.” “I was the only one who didn’t have tenure and the last guy said he wouldn’t do it anymore.” I then asked what the general education students in the classroom thought of this idea, the general education teacher rolled her eyes and said with a big sigh, “I guess they tolerate it.” (Probably more than she did.)

The general education teacher then asked me why I was there. I explained the situation and she said, “Do you know anything about the law?” I said that I did know a little (wishing to crawl under the desk again) and she said, “Well, I think it’s against the law.” I asked what she meant and she said “Inclusion is against the law. The law requires that you guarantee a continuum of services. When you place a child in an inclusive environment, then they lose these services.” I chose not to debate with her, but found her perspective to be interesting. Definitely, based on what I observed in her room, there was a lack of “services.” There was a lot lacking in fact. My thoughts are that even the general education students in this class were missing out on a great educational and emotional opportunity. There definitely was a different air in this room than the previous room.

As I reflected on all that I had observed, my conclusion is rather simple. It is all a matter of attitude. The classrooms that worked had staff that believed in what they were doing. The staff that did not believe in inclusion radiated their non-acceptance to the students and the rest of the world. Their rooms were not comfortable, safe learning environments that supported and nourished the members of their community. Instead they were tense, uninviting rooms. Attitude, attitude, attitude was the first pre-requisite necessary for successful inclusion. Second, the staff had to be in harmony, both in their philosophy as well as in their respect for each other. In addition, the pre-requisites of any good classroom definitely needed to be in place. Good classroom management is of

utmost importance. Respect, compassion and a sense of humanity would seem to be tools that would benefit any community that is accepting of diversity.

Upon leaving the school, I stopped in to speak to a teacher who teaches in the self-contained AI room. I told her about my project and asked her for her opinion. She thought for a moment and said, "It's all about the teaching staff." "If they accept the students and have reasonable goals, then all students could be in an inclusive environment." She looked at me with bright eyes and said; "It really sounds simple and looks that way on paper." She then explained further that the goals of the teacher had to be realistic. "You don't place a special needs child in an algebra room necessarily with the thought that he'll be doing calculus the next year." "Instead, you set goals.. perhaps social goals, cooperative goals, etc. and take baby steps." She hesitated for a moment and then said, "But it's all about the staff and their attitude."