

# **Inclusive Schooling Observation**

## **High School and Middle School**

Near Suburbs

3/2/02

For the interview and observation process, I sat in on a total of 4 classes of 1 hour each, observing the class functions and interviewing the teacher(s) at the end of the period. All of my interviews were in-person question and answer sessions that took place in the classes that I observed with the teachers that taught them. The disabilities I observed included Learning Disabled, Emotionally Impaired, Hearing Impaired, Attention Deficit Disorder, and a variety of severe disabilities in a SXI classroom. The following report is a class-by-class description of what I observed and learned during my time spent in the inclusive schooling environment.

In order to complete my Inclusive Schooling Observation Report, I decide to take two visits to a Class A high school in south Detroit. The school has an enrollment of approximately 1311 students, and it is located in a predominately white suburban area. The building was completed in 1970's, and I notice that the physical layout of the building isn't designed to accommodate students with disabilities; for example, there are no large bathroom stalls for people with physical disabilities like one might find in a more modern facility. All things considered, the school is a pretty typical example of a high school in the United States. On my first trip to the school, a predetermined schedule has been set for me in which I am to visit two specific classes. Upon my arrival, I go to the main office, get a "visitor" patch with my name on it, and head for my first observation classroom.

### **Biology**

The first class I visit is a basic biology class for sophomores. I arrive a few minutes before the class is actually scheduled to begin, and take a seat in the back right corner of the classroom. The room has many science related posters on the walls, and there are some shelves with a number of text books in the front right corner of the class. Books aren't assigned to the students; rather, as they come in, they take one off of the racks and go to their assigned seats. The floor of the room is actually tiered, with 5 different levels. There is a lab table/teacher's desk in the front, and the students' desks are in 5 straight rows going up the tiers. There are not many students in this particular class; a good approximation would be 15-20. The students in this class are all white or Mexican-American, and there aren't any bilingual students. The class is comprised of non-labeled students and about 8 students with disabilities that include LD (Learning Disabled), HI (Hearing Impaired), ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), and EI (Emotionally Impaired). There are two teachers in the class: the general education biology

teacher and a special education teacher. The students mill about the room chatting for a few minutes, then class begins as the bells ring out in the hall.

The general education teacher begins the class by having each student open the textbook he or she has and turn to a chapter review so they can review for a test. Next, he has them take out review worksheets handed out the day before so that the class can look at them together. The teacher cracks a few jokes concerning the material, and it is easy to see that the class is taught with a rather light atmosphere. Meanwhile, the special education teacher walks around the classroom helping students who can't find their papers, have a specific question about the material, or need general assistance. It is hard to tell which students are the ones with disabilities and which one aren't labeled at all; they all seem to get along and cooperate very well. After about 25 minutes, the special ed. teacher announces to the class that it is time to back in the lab and get out their "animals". The students each go into an adjacent laboratory that is connected to the main classroom and get out a mounted animal of some kind. The class has been studying different animals and how they live, and this is a kind of hands-on approach to observing those animals. The gen. ed. teacher then talks about a project that has been assigned concerning the animals and gives the students information about a test coming up the following week. Finally, with about 10 minutes left in the class, the spc. ed. teacher gets a stack of folders in which personal student journals are kept and distributes them to the class, informing students that their journals are going to be checked at the end of the week (this observation takes place on a Wednesday). When the bell rings to switch classes, the spc. ed. teacher collects the journals and the students are dismissed, ending the class.

After the class, I am able to sit for a few minutes and talk exclusively with both of the teachers. They are extremely friendly and kind, and they apologize for what they jokingly refer to as a "boring" day of reviewing for a test. I ask them several questions concerning their class and their approach to inclusive schooling. The teachers tell me that their approach to instructing the class is by taking turns teaching, switching on and off between basic instruction one day and specific instruction the next (evidently, the spc. ed. teacher also has a degree in science, which enables her to effectively teach the class as well). In order to give all the students the fairest chance to get a high grade, the grading is done like this: 30% on notes in the journal, 40% on basic class work, and 30% on exams. This allows students who are not particularly good at one aspect of the class to bolster their grade in another. The teachers say this is particularly important in their classroom because of the disabled students, whom they say tend to be stronger visual and hands-on learners. However, both instructors stress the fact that they do not alter the pre-determined curriculum in any way; rather, they adapt to the students they have and try to provide them with a wide array of learning avenues. For example, the spc. ed. teacher describes how students are given test orally or on paper, depending on the student's preference. Oral tests are given in either a quiet secluded room (for those who work better in peaceful environments) or in the back of the regular classroom (for those who like background noise). I am told that the class is more geared towards agricultural science and skill application, and much of the class work is based on daily note taking in the journals and oral presentations. For those who don't take notes well, tape recorders are

available for use. The teachers tell me that the majority of the problems in their class consist of the following: behavior problems, failure to complete homework, and lack of attention span. The teachers combat these problems by having students work together to complete many of their assignments, with students motivating each other in a friendly, competitive way. If problems get out of hand, the student is removed from the class and taken to the office. The gen. ed. teacher tells me that the spc. ed. teacher is very good at dealing with all of the issues the disabled students have, and that no other support staff is really needed for the class. No one in the class is “pulled out”—the class is totally supportive of every student. It is evident that inclusion works so well in this class that it is practically impossible for me to determine which students actually have disabilities unless I ask the teacher. The disabled students are treated with respect and helped accordingly, the non-label students are not compromised, and the two teachers love and believe in what they are doing—the only thing I can suggest is that even more audio/visual material be used during instruction. After the interview, I leave the class and thank the two teachers for all of their assistance. They are very encouraging, and say that I am welcome back anytime for more observation, perhaps on a day when they aren’t conducting a “boring” review!!!

### **Physical Education**

Upon leaving the biology class, I make my way to the gymnasium for a freshman boy’s physical education class. It takes me a while to find the gym, primarily because I don’t know where I am going, and secondly because the building seems to be a mass of halls and corridors arranged in no particular pattern. I think to myself that this building could be rather confusing for a disabled person; perhaps a building that was more symmetrical and geometrical could be helpful for those with disabilities. Once I get to the gym, I walk through a corridor with several doors leading to various locker rooms. I hear noise off to the right, and discovering that it is boys locker room, I walk through it and enter the gymnasium. It is there that I meet the two teachers of the class. After the initial handshake, I discover this class is taught similar to the biology class—there is one gen. ed. teacher and one spc. ed. teacher that take turns instructing the class and doing different activities. Next, I go up a flight of stairs to an upper gym, which contains a practice basketball court and space for bleachers to be placed during an athletic event. I find a chair by the wall and set it by the railing of the upper gym so I can observe the activities below. The gym is an average varsity gymnasium—a main basketball court with 4 side baskets surrounding it, with volleyball stanchions and other equipment against the walls. I can see that the day’s activity is going to be floor hockey, due to the fact that there are 4 hockey nets set up in the main gym and 2 set up in the upper gym directly behind me. Meanwhile, boys in gym clothes start coming out of the locker room, talking and mingling before the bell rings. Once the bells sounds, the boys all sit down in a pre-determined order in 5 rows about 6 boys deep. The gen. ed. teacher takes role, and the spc. teacher comes up and sits next to me and explains the rules of the hockey game. After role, the students go to a bin in the corner of the gym and red or blue hockey sticks, depending on their team’s color. There are 6 teams of about 5 or 6 kids, and again, I can’t tell which

kids are the ones with the disabilities; they all seem to blend together very well. Once the equipment has been distributed, the teams assemble and play begins.

I spend the rest of the hour watching the hockey games in the gym, marveling at the good sportsmanship and positive attitudes exemplified by *every* single boy in the class. I am amazed at this, thinking back to my days in high school gym class when student to student behavior was based on chaos and pandemonium!! The two teachers walk around the gym(s), observing the competition and “refereeing;” however, this seems almost unnecessary to me, since the kids are behaving so well anyway (this is probably because the students are so used to the teachers watchful eye bearing down on them!!). With about 5 minutes left before the bell rings, the students are dismissed to go change. At this time, I have a chance to sit down and talk with the spc. teacher (the gen. ed. teacher is in the locker room). He is very friendly and enthusiastic about answering my questions, which causes me to wonder if this is a trait possessed by all who work in inclusive environments!! He tells that all the freshman gym classes are boys only/girls only, because it helps eliminate gender problems. After hearing this, I wonder to myself how can a class be practicing disabled child inclusion and yet exclude interaction between the two sexes? Next I am informed that there about 10 special needs kids in this particular class, all of whom are either Learning Disabled or Emotionally Impaired. Interestingly enough, the students in the class don’t even know who the special needs kids are—no one is publicly singled out for attention. I garner that is done to establish feelings of equality amongst the class and to promote a sense of team, which the teacher stresses is a big part of the class. Most of the students in the class are white, with a few of Hispanic descent (4 or 5). I am told that grades are based exclusively on participation—showing up for class, dressing appropriately, and participating in the day’s activity to the best of the given person’s ability. He says this is done so that students with disabilities and fewer God-given physical tools can succeed in the class. When asked about students in wheelchairs, the teacher tells me that they usually just watch, keep score, or participate as much as they can. In general, the teacher says the kids get along very well, due largely in part to the fact that the guidelines for behavior were laid down and strictly enforced the first week of class, setting a standard for the rest of the year. He says that he and the other teacher try to joke around and have a lot of fun with the kids, because they want everyone to enjoy themselves. When behavior problems do occur, the teacher says they are dealt with primarily by excluding the student from a fun activity or in more extreme cases, detention and loss of a day’s participation grade. Like in the biology class, the teacher tells me that the “pull out” approach to teaching students with special needs is seldom if ever used; everything is based on support and cooperation by and with non-labeled students, who he says are more than willing to comply (which makes sense to me, since none of the kids know which ones have the disabilities anyway). He tells me that he feels inclusion in education is both beneficial and fun because no student feels inferior to the others and it gives all students an equal opportunity to succeed. At this point I wonder to myself if the special needs students in this class would be sent to another school or classroom anyway; the students all seem the same to me!!! I then wonder if this is because the results of the

inclusive teaching practices have been so effective. Either way, it is obvious to me that the class runs smoothly and accomplishes all of its objectives just fine with the special needs kids present. After the interview, I thank the spc. ed. teacher for his time, and he too welcomes me back anytime. I then go down to the main gym and thank the gen. ed. teacher, who I didn't have a chance to talk with because he was busy. He also welcomes me to return anytime, and after the class was dismissed I left the school and returned home.

My second visit to the school is similar to the first, except for the fact that I don't have a set agenda when I arrived. When I get there, I go to the main office and ask to speak with the chairman of the Special Ed. staff. A few minutes later, she comes to the office and gives me a warm welcome. She then takes me to the school library, where I sit and prepare some paperwork before the first class I am to observe begins. About 45 minutes later, she comes and takes me to an inclusive horticulture class. Wishing me well, she departs, and I enter the class.

### **Horticulture**

This class is different than any I have ever seen. It appears to be half science lab, half flower shop. There are several books on shelf carts next to the wall, and I also observe dried flower arrangements hanging from the ceiling. There are various types of ribbons, bows, and other "flowery" materials scattered about the room. There are about 16 desks, clustered together in groups of 4. In the very back of the room is a sort of flower shop, complete with a refrigerator that is noticeably filled with fresh flowers. The room has a standard blackboard, and there are old milk crates with stacks of folders in them on a shelf by the door. Students begin to trickle into the class, and soon the bell rings. The class begins, and I notice that there are four instructors in the class: 1 gen. ed. teacher, 1 spc. ed. teacher, and 2 aids who specialize in horticulture. There are only about 10 kids total in the class, all of whom are white. I later learn that there are only two types of special needs in the class: LD and ADHD. Again, I can't determine which kids actually have the disabilities. The class starts off with a student going to the board and writing the assignment in chalk, for those in the class who may have forgotten. Next the two teachers work together, covering a worksheet that was handed out the day before; they move from student to student checking the progress of their work. It is evident to me that they approach each student differently; some are dealt with more sternly than others. This tips me off that the teachers try different methods to motivate students and get them to do their best, a concept that I strongly agree with. After this was done, several of the students leave the classroom to go to a greenhouse that I hadn't yet seen, while others stay and mark their work in the progress folders that are stored in the previously-mentioned milk crates. After the folders are checked, the remaining students go with the aids to the flower shop in the back of the class and begin working on flower arrangements ordered by a local business in the community. At this time, the spc. ed. teacher takes me out to the green house, which is located outside on a little patch of land between two of the building's wings. In it is a collection of plants, trees, vines and other

greenery, owned and wintered there by members of the teaching staff and the local community. The teacher explains to me that the students are responsible for maintaining all of the plants and the greenhouse, which was built by students in conjunction with a local university in the late '90's. The students use the greenhouse as a hands-on guide for how to landscape, garden, and maintain plant life in general, she says. I observe as some students are busy cleaning up some gardening tools (i.e. shovels, steel-tooth rakes, hoes, etc.), getting them ready for an upcoming project in which they will plant flowers along a local road. After this, the spc. ed. teacher takes me back to the classroom and shows me the "flower shop" in the back. She explains that this is another part of the class that involves hands on learning. "Working with flowers and organizing bouquets, corsages, and things of that nature are things that all of the students in my class enjoy and excel at, regardless of whether or not they have special needs," the teacher tells me. Meanwhile, the students have returned from cleaning up the tools in the greenhouse and are working with the others to make fancy ribbons for the order placed by the local business. There are now only about 10 minutes left in the class, so students begin putting things away and finishing up with the flowers. At this time, one of the students comes up to me and asks me where I'm from and what I'm doing in the class. I tell her I am from a local university, and that I am observing instances of inclusive teaching. She seems interested by this, and proceeds to ask me several questions as to how and why I chose this particular university. We have a nice conversation, and she concludes it by telling me she plans on attending that university when she graduates. When she leaves, I ask the spc. ed. teacher about her. She tells me that this particular girl was one of the LD labeled kids in the class. I am very happy to see this special interest student take such an interest in a collegiate education; it really makes me feel as if I am seeing first hand how educational inclusion is paying off in a student's life.

In the last few minutes of the class, I sit down with both the gen. ed. and the spc. ed. teachers and talk with them at one of the lab tables (the horticulture aids are still in the back of the room by the flower shop). They are very enthusiastic about talking with me. I find out quickly that the two teachers went to high school together, and they share a common interest in the sciences and in team teaching. I also find out that the spc. ed. teacher and her husband own a local flower shop, which makes the class that much more pertinent for her. When we begin talking about the class itself, I am informed that multilevel education is practiced. Some students in the class have been in it for 1 semester, some for 1 year, and some have been in it for 2 years. There is no limit to the # of semesters a student takes in the class, due to the fact that the curriculum and agenda is constantly changing. Even more so than the aforementioned biology class, this horticulture class is extremely hands-on; kids are educated by working in the community doing landscaping, working with the FFA (Future Farmers of America), taking and producing orders in the flower shop, and completing crafts for the class curriculum. When I ask about the curriculum for the class, both teachers sort of laugh and tell me that they fit the curriculum in whenever the schedule "allows"; in other words, they were telling me that the hands on projects in the class *were* the curriculum, and written work with text books was secondary. Students work together on projects and are able to figure

out ways to complete assignments by working in groups and helping one another—this helps the LD and ADHD kids fit in and get the most out of the class, they say. Periodically, SXI students come to the class to observe and participate as much as they can in the day's activities. I am told that this is always a high point in the class, as the SXI students are generally a lot of fun to be around. However, the teachers usually don't know when to expect the SXI students, but they make it clear to me that they are always a joy to have around. The gen. ed. teacher tells me that most of the behavioral problems they have are students not completing their work, coming in late, acting unruly in class, and not meeting a predetermined list of class expectations; however, she says that any of these problems are rare in the horticulture class, even from the kids with ADHD and LD, because they all seem to generally like the class so much. However, when they do occur, one of the two teachers talks in a firm tone to the guilty student, and challenges him or her to do better in a style that the teacher knows works for that particular student. Next, I ask them about working in the community. The two teachers both talk of how the students' landscaping and planting of flowers along the roads outside of the school and in the surrounding community have caused them to receive countless comments and notes of praise for beautifying the city. Also, they talk of the many orders local florists and other businesses place with their class's flower shop, orders that keep the students busy with hands-on horticulture that actually makes some money at the same time. It is easy for me to see the impact this class is having in the school *and* in the local community.

Overall, there aren't really any accommodations made for the special needs students; I would say the entire class itself is an accommodation for students who have disabilities in that it is based on visual and hands-on learning. The class is totally supportive of every person in it, regardless of ability level—the only time any one is singled out is when they are being reprimanded for a behavioral problem, and even that is rare, since the students appear to enjoy the class so much. Therefore, mainstreaming is extremely successful in this class, for *everyone*—I think it actually more like a small business than a class. The only suggestion I have for this class would be to incorporate a little more traditional text book/written work for those students who excel in the more traditional areas of education. After the interview, I thank both teachers for their time and tell them I think their class is really doing great things. They tell me it was a pleasure and they say come back anytime for more observation. With that, the spc. ed. teacher walks me to the SXI room.

### **SXI**

I am totally unprepared for what I encounter when I first come into the SXI classroom. There are 7 students in the class, 6 whites and 1 African American. All of the students are severely disabled, with various forms of mental and physical retardation, and all except the African American boy are in wheel chairs. Each student has an aid next to him or her, and they are sitting in a semi-circle around a music therapist who is singing along to a traditional Latin folk song, encouraging the children to sing along with her. There is a table in the back of the room and I take a seat next to two women who are gen. ed. students, students who have come in to the SXI room to help out during their free

time. The room is half regular classroom, half preschool room. In the front by where the musical therapist is standing is a boom box, a computer, a blackboard, a storage cabinet, a teachers desk, and several brightly-colored, seasonal wall displays. There aren't really any books in the room, but there are charts on the wall that indicate how students are doing in different areas. In the back of the room are toys, games, large "play things", or in other words, stuff one might find in a preschool classroom. There are no desks or even places to sit, other than a few scattered chairs and the table that I am sitting at. While I am observing these things, the music therapist takes a tambourine around to each student, encouraging them to all sing along and pat the tambourine when it comes by. Though most of the students have physical deformities, it is still obvious that they are having a marvelous time, making delightful noises along with the music and keeping the beat with their hands or feet. Eventually, the music stops, and the music therapist asks if anyone has a special request. The African American boy, who appears to have the least amount of mental retardation, requests *The Twist*. He is helped to his feet, and begins to break into his own version of the twist, which is ensued by an uproarious laughter from the entire class, including myself.

At this time, it is about 20 minutes before the end of the school day. I discover that these SXI students are released 15 minutes early so that they are able to reach their bus before the gen. ed. students get out of class. Once the students are gone and most of the people are left, I discover that one of the aids is really a janitor. When I ask her what she is doing in this class, she breaks into a broad smile. "I just love watching these kids grow and learn," she says. "It makes me feel so good to be around them, and it is much more fun being with them than it is being in my office!" After witnessing the singing/dancing display of a few minutes ago, I can't help but agree with her. The kids seemed so happy to be there. Next, I talk to the lady that I presume is the teacher of the class. Unfortunately, she informs me that the actual teacher of the class is absent for some reason that I am not sure of. However, she points to another lady still in the classroom that might be of assistance. I begin talking to this lady and discover that she is one of the Para-pros in the class. She happily answers my question that I have about the class. From her, I discover that this is the only SXI class the school has; at other times, the SXI students are participating in classes that would be considered electives (i.e. gym, music, art, home economics, etc.). She validates my previous assumption; all students in the class either have severe mental or physical retardation, or a combination of both. However, she points out that these students were selected for mainstreaming because they demonstrated capabilities in one way or another that provided evidence that it would be beneficial to *them* to mainstream them in a public school. She tells me there is one special education teacher assigned to the room and three pros-pros who work collaboratively to come up with daily plans for the students and things of that nature. I ask her if she had an SXI-labeled child if she would mainstream them—after thinking about it for a minute, she replies yes she would, but only because she saw some of the great benefits and joy it brought to the students; she says she would have said no 10 years ago, because she was unaware of the benefits. This statement makes me believe that mainstreaming would be much more effective if the public became aware of the



benefits that it provides for disadvantaged, disabled, and special needs students. Also, it shows me that inclusion has come a long, long way in the past 10 years in terms of its successful application. Because the regular teacher wasn't there, I am unable to really put a finger on how instruction and grading are done; however, by looking at the charts and things on the wall, I garner that the grade is based on participation and personal ability level. I don't even bother to ask about behavior problems in the class, because it is obvious to me that it isn't a pertinent issue for these students. The pro-pro tells me that different therapists come in regularly to help children with things like music, exercising, speech, and other functions—I just happened to come in on a day when the music therapist performed. She says that overall, the class is a joy to work in, with the kids trying so hard and the attitude so positive. To be honest this makes me a little emotional, and I start thinking of how God has so thoroughly blessed me in my own life, and I how I am so undeserving of it. She says that in sense, each student has to be “pulled out”, because the severity and difference in the various conditions is rather extreme; however, the class is taught in an all inclusive, supportive way in that the kids are taken to gen. ed. classes to participate with the other students on a regular basis. I ask her how they are received by the gen. ed. students, and she says that about 75% of gen. ed. students are very supportive and helpful, while the other 25% are uncomfortable and unsure of how to act. I think this observation lends support to the fact that students are for the most part *very willing* to work with those less fortunate than themselves, and I think that says a lot about the character of America's young people. Unfortunately, my interviewee's time is running short, and she has to leave. However, it is safe to assume that this class can be considered very beneficial to all parties involved: severely disabled students, in that they have a chance to coexist with the gen. ed. students; gen. ed. students, in that they are more able to understand and appreciate the kids with disabilities and that they learn to appreciate everything God has given them; teachers and staff, in that they are able to observe all of these positive effects of mainstreaming the SXI students. All in all, this class brings a joy to my heart. I would change *nothing* about how it was conducted.

After I leave the class, I ask a student direction to the special education office, and he sends me over there. I go in and again thank the teachers who have worked with me, including the chairman who was nice enough to have me come visit her school. Again, they are very happy to have me and welcome me back anytime I want to come. With that, I get in my truck and drive home with a good feeling in my heart about the effectiveness that I have witnessed first hand concerning inclusive education.

In summary, both of my visits were outstanding and enlightening. I learned so much in just a few hours time, and it was a lot easier for me to go into an unfamiliar environment when the staff was so positive and accommodating. I have no doubt in my mind that inclusive schooling *can* and *will* work if it is conducted in this fashion.