

Inclusion Interview

January 27, 2003

The mainstream teacher I interviewed, Jack Webber, is in his 30th year of teaching. Although currently with the Snoqualmie School District, he has taught every grade K through 12 in over 7 districts. He informed me that he would answer the questions according mostly to his recent experience, but would also incorporate other experiences when appropriate. I welcomed the chance to get insight from a teacher with this kind of tenure.

From Mr. Webber's recount of the changes in special ed over the last thirty years, it sounds like the drastic transformation in the program has had positive benefits as well as negative consequences. Although he fully supports and advocates inclusion, he thinks that the implementation has been poor. I personally have already witnessed some of the "disaster" that he referred to in my own internship classroom. In my third period class, 14 of the students are SpEd. Most of the classrooms at my middle school have 3-4 SpEd students. My mentor teacher has been extremely frustrated with this situation and recently demanded that the 7th grade resource teacher pull out all of our third period SpEd kids and teach them math in another room. After interviewing Mr. Webber, I can see how this type of pull out may have a negative impact on all of the students. I am afraid that I will return to my internship site in February to see that those kids are now acting out and performing to their lowered set of expectations. I hope that the other students are not treating them differently.

Ironically, Mr. Webber mentioned the film we watched in class last week as one of the strongest impacting things that his district has done for him regarding special ed. One of his perspectives, which I had not heard before, was the demand that "ALL students receive IEP's". I think that the point he was trying to make here is a very valid and valuable one; every student has different learning needs and every student should get the individual attention and dedication that they need to succeed. His philosophy centered mainly on teaching to every child's unique needs and ignoring no one.

Overall I left the interview feeling like despite the barriers and opposition, that the idea of "Leave No Child Behind" is actually feasible and necessary. Mr. Webber spoke of "disaster" throughout the implementation of inclusion; but he also spoke of the absolute necessity of meeting every child's needs even if resentment and opposition are part of the outcome. It is encouraging to see someone that has been in the profession for thirty years that still has a true passion for reaching each and every child.

1. How has your involvement with teaching special needs students changed in the past few years?

“In the last thirty years, teaching special needs students has changed dramatically. They used to be housed in the “special Ed room” and we basically only know if they were around if something happened. The “Special Ed” teacher had a self-contained room that was usually far away from everyone else. With the movement to inclusion with the new laws requiring placement in the “least restrictive educational environment” they began to be included in the classroom. The concept was long overdue and educationally correct for not only the special ed student, but the regular ed student as well. The major problem with the transition was two fold. One the stigma and stereotype that had been built up over the years and two the legislation carried no additional funding and thus drained resources from an already strapped school budget. Several special ed teachers were let go and regular teachers were expected to address student needs they had no background or training for. Add to this that the class sizes increased and you had the recipe for disaster. There were very bitter feelings and opposition from parents in both camps who were not educated or informed, but simply told on the first day of school. Since the early 90’s things have settled down a bit as staffs have figured out ways to reallocate resources such as room, training and parent education.”

2. Have these recent changes increased student success at all?

“Yes and no. It is difficult and dangerous to generalize about even with regular students and misleading at the least to begin to lump all special ed students together. Then there is the issue of how do you define success. There have been drastic gains in acceptance and understanding of students with learning disabilities as well as physical or emotional handicaps. Regular students have made tremendous gains in empathy and inclusion of all others, not just special ed students. Academically there was some slippage as teachers struggled with how to teach to the diverse needs of special ed students. Training has been a huge success as many regular teachers learned techniques that worked with many students that had a touch of a learning disability yet were not qualified for special ed, yet were traditionally in the regular class room and simply labeled as low. Some situations were disasters especially with autistic or extremely behavioral students creating unteachable environments.”

3. What other resources/services do you think would help you teach SpEd students?

“It is not resources or services, it is a paradigm change in attitude and perspectives that is needed. ALL students are special education students. There is no such thing as a normal or average student. That is a myth. Every student has a unique and individually complex learning style based on their

unique background both in and out of education. Every student deserves an Individual Educational Plan (IEP). The mistake was not treating ALL students like special education students. The myth that the best way to teach students is to put them in groups of 30 and talk to them for 6 hours a day is absurd and always has been. The resource needed is more effective and efficient tools to analyze the exact learning styles of each and every student, not just those on the outer ends.”

4. What resources/services are provided in your district for students with special needs?

“Each student has an IEP and is put into the “least restrictive environment”. A special ed teacher and in some cases an assistant is assigned to each.”

5. Have the resources and services your district provides been beneficial to your SpEd students?

“Yes and No. Some yes and some no. Impossible to generalize.”

6. How has your district helped you to teach students with special needs?

“Most districts spend a great deal of resources training teachers on learning disabilities. The video “F.A.T. City changed my teaching drastically for all my students. Districts did not however address the overcrowding of classrooms or provide many special materials, that was left to the remaining special ed teachers and regular teachers to develop while still teaching the normal load. Thus many teachers resented the additional load. Some however welcomed the challenge and adopted the philosophy that every kid enrolled in the school whether in their class or not was their responsibility to teach if the opportunity presented itself.”

7. How involved/ supportive is your administration in assisting you to effectively teach SPED students?

“Depends on the individual principal and superintendent. Some get it and really provide the resources to get the job done. Others give it lip service and never deliver workable environments.”

8. What is your district’s policy on inclusion?

“This is not about districts, it is about state and national laws governing inclusion. Districts are mandated to follow them.”

9. What strategies and adaptations do you use to meet the instructional needs of students with disabilities?

“Love. Caring. Patience. It works miracles with every student, not just those with disabilities. You take every student wherever they are, whatever they are and mentor them in their natural desire to learn. No grades, no ranking, no judgments, no separations. Take each student each day in each subject and treat them uniquely.”

10. How would you rate the communication level between resource teachers, mainstream teachers, and parents?

“Depends 100% on each situation in each school in each classroom. Some do a fantastic job and the team collaborates to be positive child advocates. Others end up as disasters with upset parents, frustrated mainstream teachers and overwhelmed resource teachers. It goes the gamut from excellent to horrible, depending on what the personalities are, what time resources they have and how supportive they are of the concept of inclusion.”

Additional Comments from Mr. Webber:

“Inclusion is an excellent idea and very successful if the paradigm of those implementing it is that all students have some degree of learning challenges. The minute you try to draw a line somewhere and say this group is the only group with learning disabilities (by establishing criteria to be put in the resource room) it instantly creates artificial barriers and educational obstacles. The very laws that have mandated inclusion (which is a good thing) also establish funding criteria based on the establishment of a separate group that now needs including (a bad thing).”

“The solution is to design classrooms, instruction and schools around every student's unique learning needs and styles each and every day in each and every subject. Then the differences between all students becomes seamless and every student gets exactly what they need to successfully learn each and every day. The real issue is not about the resource students fitting into the classroom, but rather fitting the regular classroom to the needs of every student. The more we move towards a truly personalized as opposed to generic or even individualized educational plan for every student, the more we will succeed.”