A High School Inclusion Program: A Deeper Look
By Cara Shuckett

I began my career seven years ago as a middle school special education teacher at School of the Future (SOF). For the first four years of teaching, I felt as though I was doing good work. Even though there were many struggles, the successes seemed to far outweigh the failures. Two years ago, I decided to move up to the high school and work with eleventh and twelfth grade students. This year, I was fortunate to meet up with the students who I worked with throughout middle school, now juniors in the high school. Having the opportunity to work once again with the same students has given me a unique perspective on their growth and has led me to the question:

How is the inclusion program meeting the needs of my students?

SOF is located in Gramercy in Manhattan. There are 632 students in classes of approximately 25 in this grade 6 through 12 progressive public school aligned with the Coalition of Essential Schools. The school is heterogeneous with regard to race, ethnicity, class, and academic achievement; 98% of students attend college or university. SOF is part of the New York Performance Standards Consortium, a group that advocates and practices assessment practices that serve as alternatives to high-stakes testing: Unlike most high schools students in New York City, our students are required to take only one Regents exam—English Language Arts. In lieu of other Regents exams, students take part in a rigorous exhibition process through which they complete an independent research project in every subject.

Classes in the middle school and the ninth and tenth grade are divided into four sections. Students travel with their section to content area classes. This year, the school

decided to begin a new model for the Junior and Senior Institute: eleventh and twelfth graders were able to choose from a variety of different topics in English and history thus combining the grade levels; math and science classes stayed separate.

Fifteen to twenty students in each grade receive Special Education Teacher Support Services (SETSS), and each grade has one special education teacher who works with two to three sections per grade in content area classes. There are no more than eight Individualized Education Plan (IEP) students in each section. SOF follows the "push-in" model, which enables a child to receive services within the regular classroom setting. To better meet the students' needs, the SETSS teacher will sometimes work with a group of students in the hallway or in the classroom on content that is being considered in the general education classroom.

I am responsible for pushing into different content area classes according to a student's IEP. I also meet with the content area teachers weekly in order to discuss students' needs and differentiate the curriculum for them. In addition to SETSS, I am the Transition Coordinator. Some of my responsibilities include applying for SAT modifications, completing exit interviews with graduating seniors, and ensuring that students understand how to access support services once they leave secondary school. When I began in the fall, there were a total of 19 SETSS students in the eleventh and twelfth grade in English, history, and math. Another staff member worked one quarter time as a SETSS teacher in the sciences. Thus, in the first semester, I worked with five teachers: two English teachers (four times a week), one history teacher (two times a week) and two math teachers (11th grade twice a week; 12th grade twice a week).

Each time I work in classroom it is for a 45-50 minute block. By spring, two additional students had been evaluated and given services, so I was then responsible for 21 students. Having felt scattered and unproductive in the first semester, I decided to prioritize my second semester schedule by focusing only on English and math.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the reauthorization of the 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004 and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), there is a push towards making sure all students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, demonstrate success academically.

In accordance with NCLB, special education students' standardized test results are included in the data to determine a school's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). In accordance with IDEA, students with learning disabilities must take part in the general education curriculum and standardized assessments (Morocco, Aguilar, Clay, Brigham, & Zigmond, 2006, p.138). Now more than ever, there is little room for error. Inclusion programs that involve collaborative planning and teaching between general and special education teachers are increasingly used as the service delivery model for students with learning disabilities (McLesky, Henrey & Axelrod, 1999 as cited in Klingner and Vaugn, 2002). Most of the research on inclusion focuses on the benefits it provides for younger students. The degree to which learning-disabled students benefit from being placed in the general education classroom full time is still unclear and particularly so with regard to high school students (McLesky et al. 1999 as cited in Klingner and Vaugn, 2002).

Klingner and Vaughn's study suggests that there was no differentiation of instruction for students who struggled the most (Klingner and Vaughn, 2002, p. 26). In part, the difficulty of knowing how to work with learning disabled high school students has to do with the fact that there is little research about these students: "Special education students have approximately twice the dropout rate of general education students" (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002 as cited in Morocco et al. 2006, p. 139).

I focused a large portion of my research on the Good High School Project—a three year study of high schools that showed positive results for their interventions with students with disabilities (Morocco, Cobb, Clay, Parker, Zigmond, 2006). According to the study, high school is a time when students need to strengthen their academic skills and special learning strategies, build competence and independence, develop strong and rewarding relationships, and prepare for transition from school to the work force and/or a post-secondary environment (Morocco, et al., p. 135). Thus, the best high school practices for students with disabilities include providing academic choice and an ensemble of academic support, connecting with and motivating students, building an adult community to work with students and developing responsive leaders (Morocco, et al., p. 138).

Higgins, Raskind, Goldberg, and Herman (2002) conducted a 20-year longitudinal study of 41 individuals with learning disabilities (LD) to try to "understand as fully as possible and describe the common life-span experiences of our students so that generalizations, implications and recommendations could be made for all persons with LD" (Higgins et al., p. 3). One of the key features of success for these students according

to the study was self-awareness which the researchers describe as "the ability to develop an understanding of LD, develop comprehensive awareness of how LD impacts life, develop awareness of successful coping strategies to compensate for LD, and enhance general self-acceptance as well as acceptance of LD" (Higgins et al., p. 8).

Other indicators of academic success in college are self-determination and metacognition (Garcia & Pintrich, 1994 as cited in Trainin, Lee, 2005, p. 262). Metacognition is the ability to adjust behavioral and environmental functioning in response to changing academic demands (Zimmerman, 1986). Therefore, the role of the special educator is "to create accommodations and modifications that maintain the integrity of the lesson while addressing the unique learning needs of the student" (Fisher, Frey, & Thousand, 2003 as cited in Dukes and Dukes, 2005, p. 57).

TOOLS AND DATA

Critical Friends Groups

Critical Friends Groups (CFG) is SOF's professional development. The groups meet once a month for two and a half hours. Mine was an eclectic group of seven teachers representing different content areas, support positions, and grade levels. Each time we met, a different teacher presented a question. Various protocols for looking at student work were used to help us analyze our teaching. I presented three eleventh grade SETSS students; we looked at three years of their written work, progress reports, and transcripts (Appendix A).

STUDENT 1 was diagnosed with a learning disability in elementary school. The student did not speak English at home and had no exposure to the English language until the first grade. Student 1 had trouble with language processing and perhaps had some language delays due to his limited exposure to English. His vocabulary was extremely weak, and he struggled with basic reading comprehension and writing. He used a laptop in the humanities for taking notes and writing assignments. He was an extremely motivated and hardworking student and did not believe that he had a learning disability because he had a 85%-90% average. Despite the fact that he failed the ELA Regents twice and did very poorly on the SAT, it was difficult to convince him to accept support and did not plan to do so in college. He was very respectful to staff members and kind to other students but he did not have a lot of friends and often ate lunch alone.

STUDENT 2 was diagnosed with a learning disability in elementary school and had been at SOF since middle school. He had dysgraphia and struggled with organizing his thoughts and expanding his ideas. At home, he used a computer equipped with organizational software to complete written assignments. Over the year, his writing improved and he seemed to enjoy learning about current events. He did not often draw on the special education support. He was respectful to staff members, got along with students, and had a close social network.

STUDENT 3 was also diagnosed with a learning disability in elementary school and had been at SOF since middle school. He had extremely strong critical thinking skills, verbal expression, and listening comprehension. He had dyslexia and struggled with reading,

spelling, and writing, which he compensated for by memorizing sight words. Neither his interaction with print, which was labored, nor his writing reflected his high level of thinking. Though he seemed to think that everyone perceived him as "dumb," he would not accept any academic support. He failed ninth grade humanities and was often at risk of failing other courses because he was unable to complete assignments.

He was typically either late or absent from school. He had a lot of friends who formed a rebellious social network. In the CFG, we used Meier's five "habits of mind"—point of view, evidence, significance, alternative point of view, and connections—to frame our discussions of students' writing.

Following the habits of mind, we used writing to assess evidence, connections, and alternative points of view. We measured growth by comparing writing samples, looking for development of structure, a decrease in grammatical and syntax errors, and a decreasing need for support.

Teacher Questionnaire

I surveyed 40 staff members regarding the strengths and weaknesses of SOF's inclusion program (Appendix B) and 23 responded. The teachers surveyed had very little formal training in special education. Most of the teachers' first exposure to special education had been through teaching in an inclusion classroom. Three teachers had taken one class in their graduate program and two teachers attended Mel Levine's Schools Attuned workshop.

Strengths included:

✱ Weekly planning time during preps, lunch, or after school. These meetings enabled teachers to plan lessons with accommodations and to discuss students.

✱ The push-in of SETSS teachers into their class one to five times per week.

✱ Coaching from the SETSS staff, which helped them learn strategies, such as graphic organizers, as well as alternative methods of assessment.

✱ Equitable learning environment for all students, including those who do not have IEPs.

✱ Increased self-esteem among students.

✱ Greater class participation and on-task behavior by LD students.

✱ Better written papers.

Weaknesses included:

✱ Concern about slowed-down pace of the classroom.

✱ A need for a special education teacher in the classroom constantly.

✱ SETSS teachers are spread too thin.

✱ Not enough planning time for teachers to affectively modify lessons and provide appropriate accommodations for students.

✱ Not enough time to work one-on-one with severely disabled students.

✱ Not enough support to improve basic literacy and math skills.

✱ Resistance by some students to the support of special education teachers in the classroom with them.

The three special education teachers who completed the questionnaire felt that the success of the inclusion program is highly dependent on the strength of the content area teacher.

Table 1 lists teachers' suggestions for changes to the inclusion program in four broad categories: curriculum, structure, support, and collaboration.

Table 1: Staff Suggestions for Inclusion
n=23

Curriculum	Structure	Support	Collaboration
• Protocols to check in with comprehension of the IEP students • Assessments that take into consideration different student needs • More basic skills work	• Collaborative Team Teaching • Focus SETSS time with students (1 on 1) • More SETSS teachers • More leveled grouping • SETSS teachers use advisory period to work with students on skill building • Half pull out and half push in • Add a resource room period	• America Read tutors and senior students to act as tutors • Books on tape/listening stations in class libraries • Explicit strategy charts in the class room • Forced Small Group Instruction attendance	• Require assignments to be looked at by both content and special education teacher • Teachers inform SETSS teachers of curriculum • More consistent time to plan with SETSS teacher

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Class Observations

I wanted to look more deeply at three classes to keep track of the type of activities taking place when I was in the classroom. I choose one class where I felt my time was productive, one class where I sometimes felt productive, and one class where I was frustrated.

I attended each of the classes two to four times per week for a period of approximately 45 minutes each. I kept a running record over a period of three weeks noting how much time was spent on group work, independent work, teacher-led

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discussions, studentled discussions, and lectures. I made a chart and divided it into 10-minute blocks and kept a tally of how much time was spent on each of the five activities (see Figures 1, 2, 3).

Class 1 had an almost even split among the different activities: 40% of class time was spent on teacher-led activities; 5% on student-led discussion; the remaining time was spent on class work, either in groups (25%) or independently (30%) (see Figure 1). Initially, I felt moderately successful in Class 1. However, as the year progressed, I began to feel more useful because the class structure shifted towards student-directed activities.

I felt the most successful in Class 2, where only 5% of class time was spent on lectures and 35% on group work. Twenty percent of class time was spent on student-led discussion and 20% on independent work (see Figure 2).

Class 3 spent less than a quarter of class time on student-led activities. It was the class in which I felt the least productive. I often spent my time standing in the back of the room listening to lectures (see Figure 3).
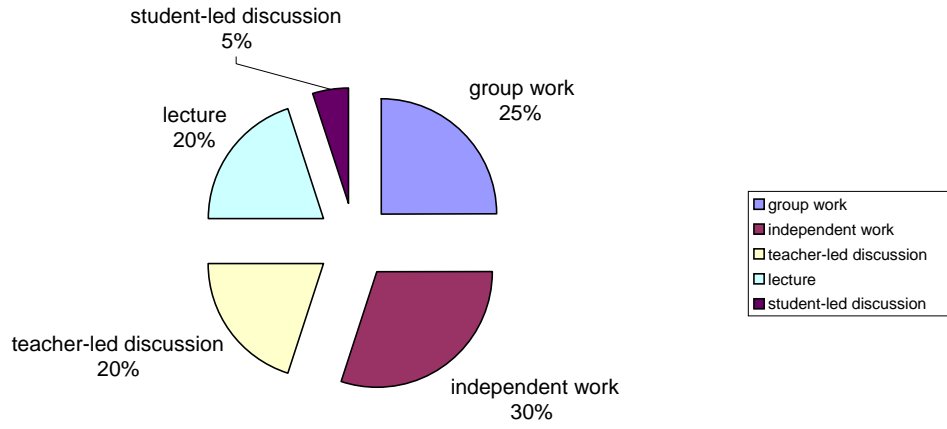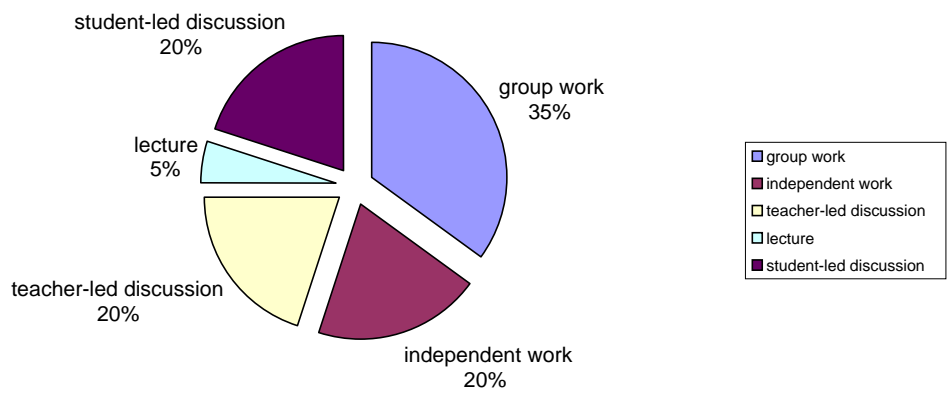
Figure 1: Class 1

student-led discussion
5%

group work
25%

lecture
20%

teacher-led discussion
20%

independent work
30%

- group work
- independent work
- teacher-led discussion
- lecture
- student-led discussion

Figure 2: Class 2

student-led discussion
20%

group work
35%

lecture
5%

teacher-led discussion
20%

independent work
20%

- group work
- independent work
- teacher-led discussion
- lecture
- student-led discussion

Student Survey

All 21 11th and 12th grade SETSS students completed a survey that I created based on questions that were used in surveys from the Good High School Project (Morocco et al. 2006) (see Appendix C).

In order to show the results of the survey, I broke down the questions into two categories: learning and school tone (see Figures 4 and 5). The majority of the students felt positive about school, believing that they were encouraged to work together and that they had the learning opportunities that they needed.

The students liked the school. They felt they had friends and teachers who cared about them. For them, school was a safe place.
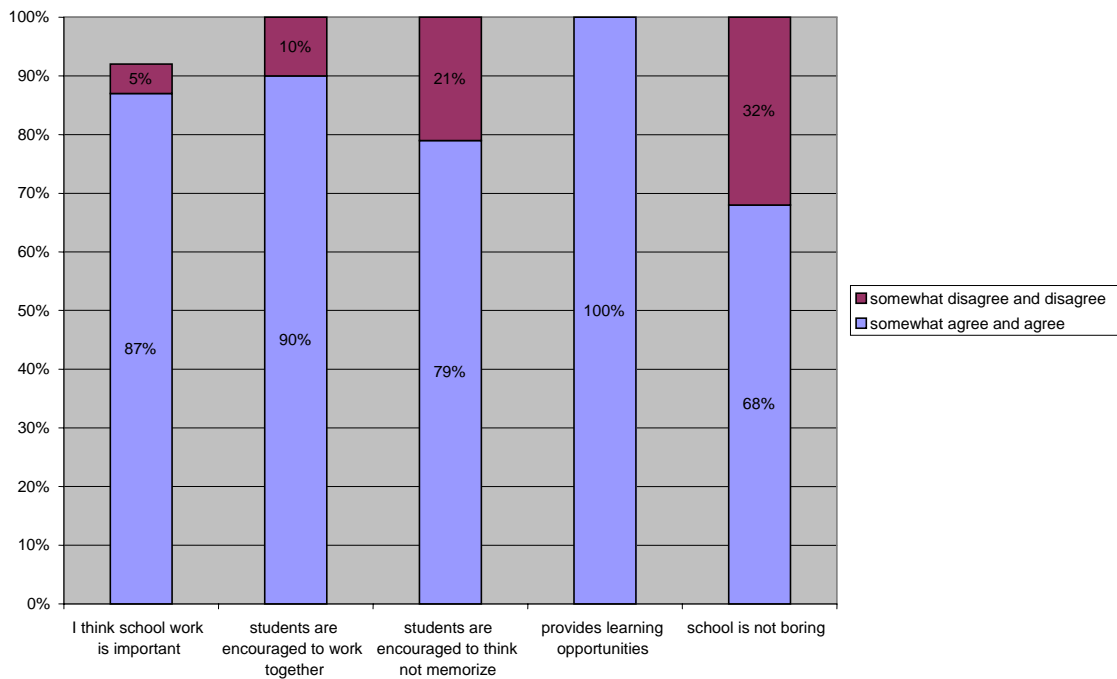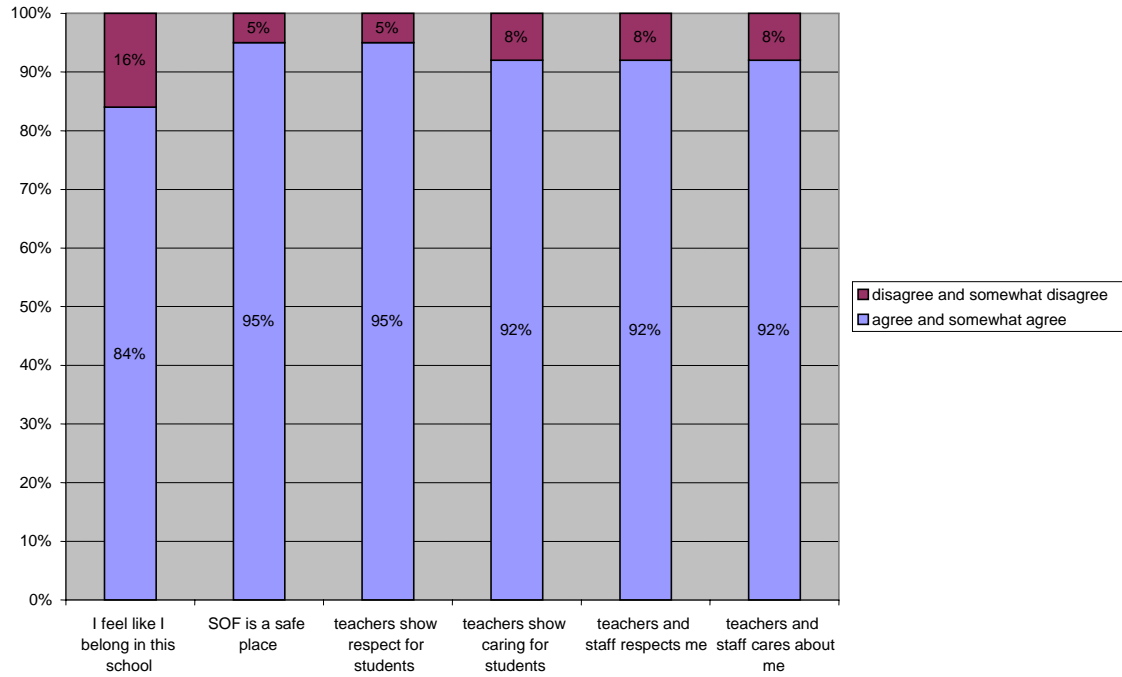
Figure 4: Learning
n=21

Figure 5: School Tone

n=21

Questionnaire about Self-Awareness of Learning Disabilities

Self-advocacy and self-understanding are large indicators of success for students with

learning disabilities. As a result, I wanted to gain a better sense of my students' thoughts

on learning disabilities and how they connect that awareness to themselves as learners. I

gave all of my SETSS students a questionnaire, and 14 out of 21 responded (see

Appendix D).

Most students showed a rudimentary understanding of their own learning

disabilities. They described their learning issues as follows:

✴ I can't memorize formulas

✴ It is harder to pass tests

✴ I get headaches when I read

✷ I need extra help

✷ I retain information in a different way

✷ I use alternative learning styles

✷ Something is wrong with me

✷ I was told I did

✷ I have problems with visual and fine motor skills

✷ I need extra time to learn

✷ I retain information in a different way

Students described the support they received in school as:

✷ I get help after school

✷ Teachers come into the class to help

✷ I get extra time on tests

✷ I have Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy

✷ I get one-on-one help

✷ I get help for reading and writing

✷ I discuss problems with a teacher

While the majority of students felt that they received extra help as needed, few requested support. Only five students claimed to have seen their IEP and to have participated in the annual review process. More than half of the students said that they planned to apply for support services in college (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Understanding of LD
n=14
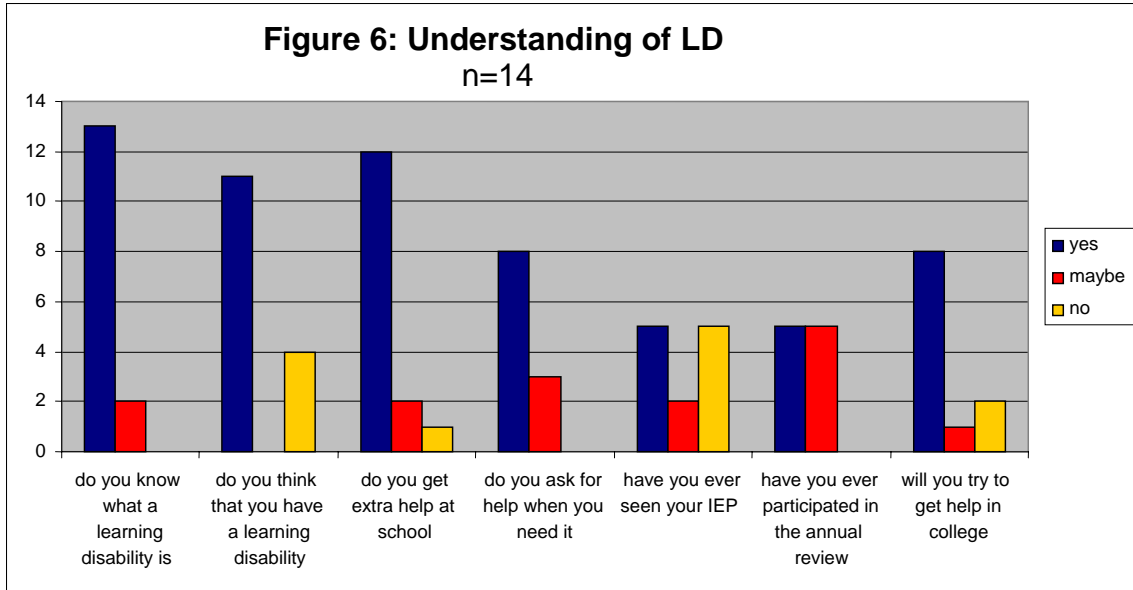
ACTIONS

A Special Elective

I decided to take specific action by concentrating on a few elements of SOF's inclusion program: For the second half of the year, I taught a small elective class focused on the academic needs not being addressed in the content area classes. I chose five students— three students with learning disabilities (including Student 1 and Student 3 from the CFG) and two whose parents had recently requested an evaluation. During the course of the class, one of the students was diagnosed to have a learning disability.

I focused the class on self-advocacy, literacy, and basic writing skills. Since all students were responsible for completing an exhibition, I decided to use the exhibitions to work on writing skills. I also experimented with grading and assessment; instead of adding up points using the typical categories of tests, quizzes, homework, and behavior, I focused on specific language arts standards, e.g., reading comprehension.

I tried to be transparent about the specific skills or standards we were addressing so they could see exactly where they were successful and what they needed to work on.

Each student received a copy of *Learning Outside the Lines*, by two graduates from Brown University, as our primary text. The book is divided into three sections: the authors' memoirs of growing up with learning disabilities, sections on specific literacy, and classroom strategies to achieve success.

The first class was rocky. The students felt targeted and singled out; they did not want this "special elective." One student, who is often resistant, kept joking that this was the "retard room." Because I was aware that students feel less targeted when not removed from class, I was prepared for the backlash and knew that it was important for the students to express their anger and dissatisfaction. I gave them a list of famous people who had learning disabilities, and all of a sudden, the class tone changed.

Over the next few weeks, I read aloud the memoirs of the authors, focusing on reading comprehension strategies and self-advocacy. The students seemed engaged and connected to the text. They spoke about their terrifying experiences of the resource room in elementary school and their feelings of helplessness when staring at a page of jumbled-up words.

Each class began with a short writing activity that focused the students on basic writing, grammar, and syntax skills not covered in the general education classroom. They practiced writing complete and clear outlines for essays. By the end of the term, they successfully mastered the skill.

Students worked on their exhibitions by concentrating on research skills, thesis development, evidence, and the revision process. Three of the five students passed the exhibition: Student 1 from the CFG group was finally able to ask for help and received Mastery, his highest exhibition score ever; another student received the highest grade

possible (Mastery with Distinction). Student 3 did not submit an exhibition paper. Another student handed in a paper but did not pass.

The Annual Review Process

Having discovered that most students had never seen their IEP or participated in their annual review, and knowing that self-awareness and self-advocacy are critical to success, I decided to make the students an integral part of the annual review process. Instead of sending an invitation only to parents, I also gave an invitation to students. This was my second action.

In order for students to become more familiar with the IEP, I had pre-conference meetings with them to discuss the previous year's IEP. Then, during the IEP meeting that involved the parents, I made the student the focus of the meeting by first asking them how they felt they were doing academically and then asking for the input of others. I tried to follow a similar protocol when writing the student goals. If a student did not feel comfortable attending the annual review, we met after the IEP was completed. Together, we would discuss it, and I would make sure that s/he understood what was discussed.

ANALYSIS

Drawing on the data from the Critical Friends Group, the surveys, the special elective, and the pre-conference meetings, there seem to be some general lessons for our high school inclusion program. The first lesson comes from our study of student progress. It seems that when we look at Student 1 who had good grades but failed the ELA Regents twice, it was his participation in the special elective where he was focused on writing

skills and able to see the benefits of teacher support that he was able to do his best work ever. This is in keeping with Higgins et al. (2002), finding that self-awareness is extremely important for students with learning disabilities. If a student continues to receive high grades even when the work does not meet academic standards, the student is at risk of not recognizing his or her academic needs and will not build necessary metacognitive skills. It misleads students and parents. If a student has an 85% to 90% average, it is shocking when they are not able to pass the Regents or do very poorly on the SAT.

A second lesson comes from looking at Students 2 and 3. Student 2, with mild learning disabilities, benefited from SOF's current inclusion model but Student 3, with severe learning disabilities, seemed to be beyond the scope of academic assistance available at SOF. According to The Good High School Project (Morroco et al., 2006) and Klingner and Vaughn (2002), most struggling students are not being taught at their instructional level—corroborating the SOF teachers' suggestions that additional one-on-one time and more focused small-group instruction is necessary to meet the needs of certain students.

A third lesson has to do with student choice. In accordance with the Good High School Project (Morroco et al., 2006), successful programs for students with learning disabilities provide academic choices for students. The SOF experiment, offering different electives in the humanities, seems to have created "buy in" and led to an increase in motivation on the part of the learning-disabled students.

A fourth lesson has to do with teacher perceptions of special education and inclusion. Like many other teachers (McLesky et al. 1999 as cited in Klingner and

Vaugn, 2002), most teachers at SOF believe that they need more help and more training for working with special education students in this environment. They want an increase of oneon-one time with the students. However, on a positive note, teachers and students believe that the inclusion program provides an equitable learning environment and helps student self-esteem. This is in keeping with the findings of Morroco et al. (2006), who claim that self-acceptance and a strong support system are necessary elements to create strong high schools for learning-disabled students.

A fifth lesson has to do with providing role models for learning-disabled students in order gain confidence and create goals for their future. According to the Good High School Project, this is an important element that creates successful program for students with learning disabilities (Morocco et al. 2006). Students in the elective class were shocked and delighted to read about successful people with learning disabilities, and this understanding seemed to motivate them.

There are lessons here for special education teachers, too. Like the teacher in the Klingner and Vaughn study (2002), I discovered that I was most effective in the classrooms that spent a significant amount of time on group work (see Figure 2). In student-centered classrooms, I did not have to single out students to work with them. The class that I was most frustrated with spent 40% of class time on lectures (see Figure 3). It was very frustrating, when my time was so limited, to stand in the back of the class during a lecture instead of actually supporting the students. In this same classroom, the remaining class time was spent completing independent work. Although this gave me the much needed one-on-one time, it also meant that when I was in the class I was forced to

specifically target a student by sitting directly next to him or her, often causing feelings of self consciousness and resentment.

Another lesson for special educators has to do with how little involvement and understanding students had of their IEPs (see Figure 6). For 11th and 12th graders, playing an active role in this process is essential for their futures. In order to receive support in college, students must advocate for themselves, as IDEA only protects them until the completion of high school. In order to continue receiving support in college, students are required to go to the disabilities office on campus to request services. They must be able to communicate their needs to both advisors as well as professors. Students must gain a strong understanding of the documents and laws that protect them. The more they understand about learning disabilities, the more power they have.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Give students a specific role in developing the IEP

   The IEP is a legal document required for all students who receive special education services in public schools. Students should be central in creating this document. Students are successful when they are self-aware and are self-advocates. The IEP process should support the development of these skills.

2. Provide professional development to help teachers work effectively with special education students

   For schools to meet AYP, they must include special education students. That means for teachers to be considered "highly qualified," according to NCLB

guidelines, they should be able to provide the appropriate education for all learners in the classroom.

3. Hire faculty who have experience working with inclusion models

   Teachers cannot be expected to automatically understand how to effectively teach in an inclusion classroom. Hiring committees must commit to hiring teachers who have prior experience or training with special education students.

4. Provide faculty with sufficient time for planning

   In order for inclusion to be successful, teachers need to be able to plan together to maximize the time spent together in the classroom and create effective modifications for students. By extending the school day four times a week, students could be dismissed early one afternoon per week and use the additional time for such meetings.

5. Provide students with sufficient time for one-on-one skill development without missing content area classes

   Special education students are often behind in basic skills and tend do well with one-on-one training. Students need to be provided with electives, special morning classes, and small group instruction that do not interfere with important class time. Schools should also develop volunteer programs with partnering organizations as well as peer tutoring programs to increase the amount of individual attention special education students receive.

6. Create reports that clearly communicate student's progress and abilities

   Students need to a have clear picture of their academic progress. By rewarding students for strong work habits, students do not walk away with a realistic

understanding of their academic abilities. Schools need to separate work habits

from the students' academic achievement and skill development. In order to

ensure student success, learning-disabled students need self-awareness and

metacognition.

7. Create mentor programs for students with learning disabilities

It is extremely important for students with learning disabilities to be exposed and

connected to people who have had similar experiences, who have overcome

challenges and are leading successful lives.

8. Provide academic choice in high school

The more engaged students are, the more motivated they will be. Allowing

students to choose different classes based on interest will cause an increase in

effort and will create a more positive and engaging learning environment.

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Appendix A
Slice / Learning from Student Work
CFG's
Monday, November 27, 2006

Cara has been trying to answer a bigger question about whether the inclusion program at SOF is successful. For the CFG we have narrowed it down to look at three senior institute students to see if their writing has improved since they have been at SOF.

1. Connections (5 minutes)

2. Cara will present her dilemma (5 minutes)

3. In your journals write down what growth in student writing might look like. Share (5-7 minutes)

4. Look at the student work. What do you see? Using the Habits of Mind as the skills we are teaching, look for growth in the student work. Take notes (20 minutes)

5. What do you see? What does it mean? Notes taken on flip chart (25 minutes)

6. Open Discussion: From looking at the student work, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the inclusion program at SOF in terms of teaching writing? (20 minutes)

Appendix B

1. What does inclusion look like at SOF?

2. How do you feel about our inclusion program?

3. What successes have you had with IEP students because of our inclusion program?

4. What successes have you had with non-IEP students because of our inclusion program?

5. What failures have you had with IEP students because of our inclusion program?

6. What failures have you had with non-IEP students because of our inclusion program?

7. If you could make changes to the way we run our inclusion program in order to meet students' needs, what would they be?

8. What training or background do you have in special education (school classes, experience teaching, etc.)?

Appendix C

1 totally disagree | 2 somewhat disagree | 3 somewhat agree | 4 totally agree

1. SOF is a safe place.

2. Teachers show respect for students.

3. Teachers show caring for students.

4. I feel safe at school.

5. This school provides learning opportunities.

6. School is not boring.

7. Teachers and staff respect me.

8. Teachers and other staff at school care about me.

9. I feel like I belong in this school.

10. I get the extra help in school I need.

11. I think schoolwork is important.

12. Students are encouraged to work together.

13. Students are encouraged to think not memorize.

Appendix D

1. Do you know what a learning disability is?

2. Explain what you think a learning disability is.

3. Do you think that you have a learning disability? Why or why not?

4. Do you receive extra help at school?

5. Explain the kind of help you get.

6. Do you ask for help when you need it?

7. What is an IEP (individualized education plan)?

8. Have you ever seen your IEP?

9. If so, what is on it?

10. Have you ever participated in the annual review (meeting where the IEP is discussed)?

11. If yes, what was it like?

12. Will you try to get support when you go to college? Why or why not?