

Special Education is Broken

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When I first came to Berkeley High School, having been hired as a non-credentialed special education teacher, my goals as an educator were soon to be recognized as unrealistic. It became increasingly obvious to me that a general education classroom, at a school that inhabits over three thousand students, would not be the breeding ground for authentic education. Classroom sizes ranging from thirty to forty students per teacher, in an urban well diversified school, make differentiation and personal attention a near impossibility. The diversity of any large urban school has its benefits, but the size itself will always be the downfall when the school focuses on lofty dreams of cultivating Ivy League students while developing the national reputation for academic rigor.

Without fail, students who are on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum will fall behind because the school's focus does not take into account the diversity it encourages. Ten percent of Berkeley High School students have IEPs because they cannot keep up with the overall demands of high school. Having worked closely with these students, I can say that the reasons for this varied greatly from the student reading at a first grade level to the student maintaining a lack of motivation due to a disinterest in going to a four-year college.

Even though ten percent of BHS students cannot cope with the standards of the school, few changes have been made in the curriculum, vocational skills classes have not been added (though there is an interest coming from some of these students), the graduation standards remain the same and teachers are encouraged to keep moving quickly through materials in order to accommodate and challenge students on the other end of this spectrum. When teachers complain about the predicament this puts us in, the D word is used as if it is the end all answer: Differentiation. Differentiation, however, is like a complicated machine. It requires many parts working together. Most notably it needs time and personal relationships to churn its gears, both of which are next to nil at BHS. Instead of making fundamental changes in school philosophy to accommodate these students, these students are referred to special education where they can receive an IEP to get the support they need.

I didn't realize when I accepted the position for special education resource specialist that a) my pedagogy would not fit in with the overall curriculum of a college prep high school and b) that I was working mostly with the exact type of students I had become interested in working with. I knew I would soon be doing a nice service by working with learning disabled teenagers, but I had no idea that the population was at least ninety percent poverty stricken, broken-homed., emotionally distressed minority students. I was only three days into my job when I began to ask myself, "How is it possible that only poor black males have learning disabilities?" This is to say, it was in this role that I began to question the way our school defines disability.

The special education program, by creating a side program for underachieving students, seals the administration's gold frame for the college prep school image that would otherwise fall apart. But even this isn't quite working so in recent months it has been whispered around the school that Berkeley Tech School (a school down the street for students with extremely negative behavior patterns) will be expanding. Right now BTECH is populated with almost one hundred percent

Latino and African-American Students. Like most diversified schools, Berkeley High School has an academic gap it seems too certain that BTECH's lack of diversity will remain pertinent regardless of how many students are admitted.

Special education seemed to be housing all of the students who could not get an "A" in overcrowded high level English classes taught by teachers who are far more interested in finishing up their PhD than teaching at high school. Despite the unfairness of it all, I still had hope that at least here these students could receive the proper support they would need in order to get something from their high school years.

Recent neurological studies attempt to explain the large minority population in special education. The following idea was summarized by Clive Cookson in a Boston newspaper regarding research presented at the American Association for the Advancement of Science. "Many children growing up in very poor families with low social status experience unhealthy levels of stress hormones, which impair their neural development... The effect is to impair language development and memory and hence the ability to escape poverty for the rest of the child's life." Because minority students make up the lower socio-economic population of our students, the demographics of the special education program are not startling. While insightful, Cook's fatalistic analysis does not hold water.

If you take some of these very same students and put them into a healthier environment, with more support, giving them one-on-one teaching opportunities, these students can flourish. I have personal experience with this as I took one student under my wing that had been expelled as a freshman. Because he was a special education student, exceptions were made to have him re-enrolled the following fall. Nico was assigned to me carrying fifteen tons of attitude on his shoulders and reading at a third grade level. Just last week he came to me to show me a report card full of A's and B's. He's even taking an AP class. Nico came into Berkeley High School his freshmen year being disadvantage, not disabled. We know students such as Nico succeed in alternative high schools throughout the country when the schools are equipped with a new design and teachers trained specifically to work with these types of students. Nico will be graduating in two months.

So, why not address the situation for what it is; the students that make up the lower socioeconomic end of our schools are not able to get their needs met within the college prep structure? The special education program makes this face-to-face with the facts confrontation a less pressing need. Yet the special education department, accompanied with paperwork, psychologists and insufficient funding is not a solution to the problem. Within this structure or process really, a child's needs are calculated in such a way so that the student is only eligible for particular resources. The process therefore must be precise and the field full of experts, but as I am no expert myself, I can promise you the determination of eligibility is as hit or miss as a game of horseshoes, played by yours truly.

Filling out the IEP is the most dreaded aspect of being a special education teacher. It can be up to thirty pages long filled with obscure language, arbitrary test results, observations and teacher input. Ideally the goals, accommodations and services written within will accurately reflect a student's individualized needs, however often times the IEP is shy of any individuation because the resource specialist is given a workload which makes personalization impossible on top of a

deadline for each IEP which brings about a very hurried process (described further in the essay). Even some of the best reports I've seen are not successful in supporting the student. A completely accurate summary of the student's ability, needs and suggested tools for support can be drawn up, a meeting held and still at the end of the day the implementation of the IEP by teacher, administration, student and parents rarely occurs. Yet, I spent more time writing IEPs and having IEP meetings than I did meeting with students and actually supporting them. So, Why the emphasis on paperwork?

The number one priority of leaders in the special education field should be to engender separation between special education and state/federal policy. This means rather than spending ninety percent of our energy trying to stay in compliance with regulations and miscellaneous paperwork, the department's efforts should be redirected toward the students who are being largely neglected because of the misdirected and overemphasis of district mandates.

However inspired I was by having these students was becoming less and less relevant, for the type of education I had always thought I would give them was somehow not an option, it is not listed on the list of resources we can offer them. What we can offer our students (if it's added to the IEP) seems to be as follows. This is not a comprehensive list, but it should help to represent the special education resource spectrum as I understand it early in my career.

At Berkeley High School we offer math and literacy classes at levels appropriate for those who are below grade level once having entered high school. We do not have history, science, second languages, art or music at the levels which would be required in order for any of these subjects' content to be accessible to a student who is reading, writing and/or comprehending at any level lower than seventh grade. Essentially this means that our students with the lowest skill levels are only advancing in two subjects a day. This also means they are sitting in classes which are mostly alienating them for the other three-fourths of the day.

We also offer a CLC class. CLC stands for consultive learning center and ultimately serves as a study hall in which teacher assistance is offered when needed. Only, when you put fifteen low leveled students in one classroom, who have been alienated for the larger percent of the day from the activities and lectures in which the majority of their peers have been engaged in, classroom management is where most of the teacher's energy is directed. If you look around this room you'll see that there are only two girls and two Latino students among everyone else who are inevitably eleven black males. When the class is quiet, we're still dealing with fifteen students who are each behind in all of their classes, all low skilled and all in need of one on one tutoring. CLC is a waste of time for over ninety-percent of students with IEPs at Berkeley High School.

Aside from special classes, BHS students with IEPs all have resource specialists (the new lingo for special education teacher). Resource specialists have many different responsibilities. First and foremost is that we make sure that general education teachers understand our student's IEPs and grade them based on their current levels and the IEP team's goals for that student. In some ways it's a matter of convincing the general education teacher to be more compassionate in grading, but also a matter based on logistics. If the reason we give for putting our students into classes above their skill levels is that we are working on social competence development, then it seems logical that our students should be graded based on the criteria that they are socially acceptable within these classes. Similarly, if the reason we give for having an illiterate student in the classroom is

that he or she should also have access to Shakespeare, then we must be sure the lessons are accessible (even if they need to be modified) to the student. Otherwise, we cannot fail her. This is something that seems very difficult for general education teachers. Ideally the resource specialist would have time to support the students and teachers that are put into these trying situations, but with the emphasis on paperwork and meetings, it is safe to say that both general education teacher and student are left deserted.

The other complication with mainstreaming is that any good teacher with admirable standards concerning education is going to question whether or not it is in fact acceptable to pass a student who has accessed hardly five percent of the curriculum's content. This leads to a discussion between general education teacher and special education teacher. It becomes a battle of philosophies intertwined with personal experiences, idealism and of course the law. Because people are passionate about education, there are a lot of defensive behaviors that come into play during these meetings and oftentimes the special education teacher's expertise and authority are completely undermined. The administration should recognize this authority and support the special education teachers if an inclusive model is going to run smoothly, yet any special education teacher knows that our department is the black sheep of the school and rarely are we seen as authority on our student's as much as we are seen as naïve overly compassionate upholders of the IEP.

As touched upon earlier, the resource specialist is responsible for creating an IEP for each student on his or her caseload. IEP stands for individualized education plan. Once a student's disability is recognized the student goes through academic testing. If discrepancies are present, the student is approved for special education resources. An IEP is created to specify which resources the student will have access to. The IEP is renewed annually serving as a legal document allowing the student special services until a transition out of special education seems possible.

The student should have academic testing (a two hour process), the IEP has to be written (about 15 pages of information to fill out based on research gathered past IEPs which is oftentimes missing), teachers and parents need to be invited and an agreed time and date needs to be set. At these meetings everyone touches base to see how it is we can best serve the student. Teachers (almost never present) discuss the student's behaviors in the classroom which are contributing to or taking away from the student's overall ability to succeed in a classroom setting. Parent express their concerns, counselors talk about graduation and future career options and the student vocalizes his/her concerns. A lot of great ideas come from these meetings and the student sits with a number of people interested in their education, but most of what is discussed at the meetings is lost only a few days later due to a lack of resources, time or motivation on the student's part.

When the IEP is sealed and stamped, the idea is that all of the information enclosed and the list of accommodations will serve as a student's support as they participate in general education classes. As much as we don't enjoy writing them, I sometimes feel that without the IEP some of our students would have next to no support at all. The tricky part is trying to have the students advocate for themselves in order to get the accommodations written within the document, but most of our students are not mature or willing enough to deal with the humiliation involved with communicating about their learning differences. They are quite honest about not wanting the extra help if that's what it will take to get it. Also, teachers who do not attend the meetings are resistant to comply to the individual plan and students end up losing faith in the entire process.

The good thing about the IEP is that it serves as a legal cushion for students; If teachers are not meeting the accommodations written within the IEP, it's near impossible to fail the student. Despite the fact that the obvious relationship between general education teacher and special education teacher should be positive and centered on student achievement, oftentimes the meeting of these accommodations gets passed right back to the resource specialist who is actually already busy preparing for another IEP meeting.

We are given up to twenty-five students who each have six teachers. This means resources specialists need to facilitate well over one-hundred personalized connections in order to ensure that our shared student both passes the class and has an experience worth his/her time. The focus should be on supporting the student well enough that we can honestly justify the student's placement within the classes. Yet the consensus around schools is that the outcome is not so positive.

Some general education teachers are entirely misguided about how much time special education teacher have on their hands. They think the special education can come to their classroom and sit with our less behaved students or intensely struggling students. Even if we were not in meetings or meeting with discipline officers randomly throughout the week, this could mean being in twenty-five different places at once (remember that is the caseload size), but it doesn't even mean that. Resource specialists at Berkeley High School teach two classes a day. For these classes we must prepare curriculum, deal with behavior issues, balance the different skill levels and implement fair assessment and grading guidelines.

I share all of this not as a way of complaining, but rather as a way to dispel the way too popular view that the resource specialist is an efficient resource for our students. Until we get away from paperwork and meetings which take up at least fifty percent of our work day, we will remain mostly ineffective as educators to students with special needs. One student told me today that he always feel bad asking for help with a question on a test because it is all too evident that everyone in the special education central area is already busy.

Our students are not getting enough support. Not only are they failing classes that we have put them in with the claim to support them, but they are also having the development of their basic skills all but put last. In some cases when they are in our special education classes, their basic skills are being developed. Still, it is an understatement to assert that one or two hours a day of skill-appropriate classes is inadequate. Especially if you can imagine that these classes look like the CLC class I described earlier. I feel as if our special education classes act as a safe place for our kids to vent and relax. Then off they go into the sea again, without a life jacket. Despite every effort by concerned people to resolve achievement gap, over three hundred of our students at Berkeley High School are given the educational experience I have just described.

"The Civil Rights Movement and the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision which extended equal protection under the law to minorities, paved the way for similar gains for those with disabilities. Parents, who had begun forming special education advocacy groups as early as 1933, became the prime movers in the struggle to improve educational opportunities for their children.

Public Law 94-142 proved to be landmark legislation, requiring public schools to provide students with a broad range of disabilities - including physical handicaps, mental retardation, speech, vision and language problems, emotional and behavioral problems, and other learning disorders - with a "free appropriate public education." Moreover, it called for school districts to provide such schooling in the "least restrictive environment" possible.

Reauthorized in 1990 and 1997, the law was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and spawned the delivery of services to millions of students previously denied access to an appropriate education. Thanks to IDEA, these students were not only in school, but also, at least in the best case scenarios, assigned to small classes where specially trained teachers tailored their lessons to each student's individual needs. Schools also were required to provide any additional services - such as interpreters for the deaf or computer-assisted technology for the physically impaired - that students needed in order to reach their full potential. And, in more and more cases, special education students began spending time every day in regular classroom settings with their non-special education peers." (Rethinking Schools Priscilla Pardini Spring 2002)

Despite compulsory education laws, students with learning differences were being neglected of an equal opportunity for education hence the birth of full inclusion in schools but in actuality, full inclusion is whispered about with negative connotations in most schools that deal with this method. Full inclusion in and of itself is not a problem, but the lack of funding to finance FI is.

In order for our students to be have their needs met, at the bare minimum, we must be able to offer them more one on one time. This means more open positions or less busy resource specialists. The student I mentioned earlier who feels as though his RSP is too busy for him suggested that we have a place in the special education office where there is always one or two people whose sole job is to assist incoming students with their work and tests. The sad thing about this is that it sounds like a position that would probably pay no more than ten dollars an hour.

In the same article, Priscilla Pardini continues, "According to the Department of Education, approximately 6 million children (roughly 10 percent of all school-aged children) receive special education services. Educating those children was expected to cost nearly \$51 billion last year, according to the Department of Education's Center for Special Education Finance, with the yeoman's share - more than \$44 billion - coming from states and local school districts. That, despite the promise made by the federal government in 1975 to cover 40 percent of the additional costs incurred by districts to educate students with disabilities. Even though federal spending for special education continues to rise (from \$3.1 billion in 1997 to \$6.3 billion in 2001), the federal government has never paid more than 15 percent of the total costs."

This is in no way a criticism of administration, resource specialists, gen-ed teachers or schools. I do believe that given the history of special education and the resources allocated to us, that we're doing the best we can. There have been limited feasible models proposed. What I'm suggesting is that we simply acknowledge that the current model is not working. It is one thing for these students to be victims of a failing model, but it reaches a point of being detrimental when we pretend that we are helping our students. Our students know that they are not getting adequate help. If they are being put into a program whose sole purpose should be to support its students, and it fails at this, what sort of message are we sending our students about seeking out resources as they move into their adult years?

People do not tend to change systems that claim to be functional. We're practically giving our students parachutes and asking them to jump off the plane but we're the only one that knows the parachute doesn't work. It's craziness. I'm not suggesting taking kids out of their harder classes or assigning them someone to follow them all day long. I'm not suggesting giving them half days where they start job training for the other half of the day (though this might be best for some of them). I'm not even suggesting that school necessarily has to be the place where we are dealing with all of these issues.

What I am suggesting is that as long as we are responsible for these children we must admit why it is that they are not succeeding and take action to better serve them. 1) The student comes from a home where he/she is not being supported. 2) The student is unmotivated or lazy 3) The student is not getting enough help at school. 4) The student has a low self-esteem. 5) The student sees no merit in public education. 6) The student has a biological learning difference. 7) The student's placement was not considered well enough. 8) The student is dealing with emotional disturbance. In every one of these situations, the child needs more support therefore we should be primarily concerned with the student on a personal level.

Contrary to popular belief, our failing students are more stressed out about school than their fellow 'A' student peers. They are not lazy so we certainly can't point a finger at them for not thriving with their "resources." When progress reports come out and I sit down with my students to inquire about their low grades they explain to me that the class is too difficult for them. When I ask them what ideas they have for improving the grade they respond, over and over again, "I need help." One-on-one help is by far the most beneficial resource we can offer failing students, yet they do not receive this easily accessible guidance. If special education teachers cannot be freed from paper work to do this more important work then let us tap into the community's volunteer programs, university programs and youth oriented organizations. When a student has a low self-esteem, he deserves a mentor. When a student hates all academics, she deserves vocational opportunities.

I watch Leon Small (a sixteen year old boy who cannot read) walk from classroom to classroom dreading the possibility of another excruciatingly humiliating moment when a teacher asks him to read and he has to decline in front of his peers. For our well adjusted students, this is externally smooth. For our least adjusted, they end up getting sent to discipline for reacting aggressively. Leon has somehow gotten through all of these years without learning to read. He said to me once, "you have no idea what it has been like to get this far and not be able to read." Another student said to me once, "they just don't understand. They think we can do it, but they don't know what it's like, how hard it is to get it done." They're right, I have no idea. What I am sure of is that this is a boy that needs to be offered more resources. If the state will not pay for it, the special education program should make it its priority to undergo major structural changes that redefine the role of SPED employees.

While our hearts in the right place, our work is deceiving. Because the work we do greatly determines these young people's futures, we must stop getting caught up in the language, laws and intentions of the special education program. This should be a field, above all others, that has student/teacher relationships directly in the center. If we can somehow redirect our program's goals to reflect the necessary personal approach to educating special education students away

from a legal documentation framework, then one would think the resources would be there for a new framework; a framework that actually works.