

Academic Leadership: The Online Journal

Volume 7
Issue 3 *Summer 2009*

Article 14

7-1-2009

Reflections on Special Education

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Recommended Citation

Peters, Sandra (2009) "Reflections on Special Education," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 3 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol7/iss3/14>

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Academic Leadership Journal

Special Education teachers are very special people. Even though I have taught 7-12th grade English, high school speech, drama, forensics, debate, and directed a Montessori Middle School teaching all subjects, Special Education was a whole new world to me. I had been present at IEPs but never presented IEPs. I have had special education students in my class with and without paras, but never had I taught special education in a self-contained classroom. This past semester, I have been able to add teaching Special Education English grades 10-12 to my resume. I have presented IEPs, participated in FBAs and created BIPs, which I didn't even know existed before this semester. I have taught students with learning disabilities and students with behavior and conduct disorders. I have met parents who have little more skills than their children and parents that have PHDs and are college professors. All exist in the world of special education.

I have learned. I have watched the MR teacher across the hall chase students down the hall to get them into class. I have worked with her to explain to her students why they can't go outside without supervision, and why they can't leave campus to go to lunch, or even go out the door, and be on the sidewalk. She has taught me about a student who eats chalk and another student who eats constantly including things in the trashcan. I have very seldom had any problems with students in class over my 27 years as a teacher. I develop relationships with students and have excellent class rapport. Since January 5th, I have had students get up and walk out because. . . . ? I have written them up and had little done to them because. . . . ? I have had students curse me out and refuse to do anything in class, (even though they were quite capable) because. . . . ? I have had a huge roller coaster learning curve.

Special education teachers are very special people. I understand why few last very long in the classroom. I know why some schools have a high rate of turnover and can seldom keep special education teachers. I understand why regular classroom teachers don't get it and don't respond to student report sheets for IEPs or don't show up for IEPs when they are invited to come. I understand why principals don't quite know what to do with special education students when they get into trouble. I understand when principals who are invited to IEPs don't show up. I understand special education department frustrations and difficulties and that they must hang in there together because no one else seems to care about them. Special education teachers are very tough, resilient and special people.

I wondered. I wondered when special education teachers find the time to complete a well-done FBA, create an ABC chart, including a scatter chart to change a behavior that seems to be ingrained since childhood in a tough senior. I wondered how the tough senior got all the way to the 12th grade with the skills he had as a tough senior. I wondered how an innocent student was shot because. . . he looked at a tough special education student. I wondered if the student who did the shooting was ED, BD or had conduct disorder. I wondered how drug and alcohol exposed babies survived to become tough 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grade students given their limitations and the limited support the teachers of these students receive. I wondered if placing a student in a class within a class around regular students

helped them succeed more than in a self-contained classroom, where they might fall to the least common denominator or rise to be the leader of the group. I wondered if the system really would care about special education students and programs if it weren't for the funds. I wondered what is going to happen to some of my female students who look normal and are quite attractive. I wondered about the students who have the same exact skills as their parents and what their grandchildren would become. I wondered why special education students were never included in assemblies or school activities and why other students were afraid of them or made fun of them because they were concerned they may be a little like them. I wondered how special education students felt about their peers and their responses to them. I wondered why regular education students felt they needed to call special ed students special names like "A-Hallers" or whatever depending on what hall the special ed classes were in, and why the student who had on a WWJD t-shirt needed to call them anything at all. I wondered why some people couldn't see why a special ed student might resort to school violence if he or she were made fun of and isolated.

I wondered why all students are not taught what happens in special education classes and programs. Why regular students are not made aware that they have disabilities too, just not IEPs. I wondered. I wondered why my son as a senior didn't get any assistance in the transition from graduation to the real world and why all students didn't have a transition plan. I wondered what happens to gifted students who don't fit in and are bored in school and didn't know they needed an IEP and got left behind and ended up on the streets or dead and why no one realized. I wondered why no teacher or school nurse or somebody ever noticed that my own son had anxiety disorder, but just constantly told me he couldn't get his act together and was disorganized and had a difficult time in class. I wondered why I, as a regular education teacher, didn't know the symptoms of anxiety disorder. I wondered why no teacher or nurse ever told me about the symptoms of ADD that were so pronounced in my sons that my oldest son told me he could have been the poster child for ADD and no teacher or nurse ever said anything. I wondered how many students I have had in my regular education classes that suffered in silence with the same symptoms, never understanding how that girl in the front row was always together, always had everything organized, always had everything in place and even turned in all her assignments in advance. I wondered what happened to that student behind the girl in the front row, feeling that there was something terribly wrong with, him that he just couldn't get it together. So he just dropped out of school, because he didn't have an IEP that said he had ADD and needed help, never knowing that it wasn't his fault.

I wondered. I wondered why a student, who lives in a neighborhood infested by gangs with three generations of family members in a gang, would think not to join a gang. I wondered if afterschool activities would have helped, or a mentor from college. I wondered why he returned directly to school after his bond was posted and how he felt when he was told he could not come back to school. I wondered what is going to happen to his two daughters, one and two years old when he gets out of jail. I wondered how his IEP helped him.

I wondered. I wondered how some special education students keep from getting depressed, and why they might have an eating disorder, when our society seems to have values that are totally antithetical to what we try to teach them. I wondered why a student with Tourette's Syndrome would even want to come to a public classroom even in special education when the likelihood is that everyone is going to laugh at them or make fun of them. I wondered where they could go to get an education where that would not happen. It seemed students in special ed might not be capable of understanding and regular

students might understand too much and the student with Tourette's Syndrome might never have a real chance to learn. I wondered why students with conduct disorder are even around students with learning disabilities or mentally handicapped students. I wondered why all conduct disordered students aren't in special schools where their behaviors can really be dealt with and they could possibly really become a functioning member of society instead of disrupting special education classrooms.

I wondered what happened to the special ed student who thought she was graduating, but learned a week before graduation, that she wasn't because she lacked a PE credit and she had failed art. I wondered if she would ever get a high school diploma. I wondered how her family would have felt to see her graduate, the first in her family since her grandmother. I wondered what the logic is in sticking to the rules and allowing a student to fall off the cliff?

I wondered why all this special ed information isn't shared with all teachers. I know they have been given books and they understand that there are issues in special education but, I would like to know why I, as a regular education teacher, didn't need to know about all these issues to be aware. Why didn't I have a mandatory workshop in 27 years to simply cover these issues so I would understand so much more about special education and what the teachers in each type of classroom, inclusion, mainstreamed, class within a class, adapted or skills classes were doing? Why wasn't this information important enough for all teachers to know? Not to force teachers to take a semester class but for all teachers to be made aware of exactly what special education is and does. Why wasn't it important?

I have learned about emotional and behavior disorders, how to assess students for emotional and behavior disorders and what kind of educational placement options are available. I have discovered things about drug and alcohol exposure that I knew and have seen but was able to objectify. I have seen, heard and witnessed substance abuse in teenagers and now I know professional and personally the impacts of those abuses. I have encountered countless incidents of school violence and now personally know students who are in a gang and can show me the identifiers under the arms of the desks in my classroom. My oldest son suffers from depression and my younger son has anxiety disorder. And, I can recognize the symptoms. I understand autism and schizophrenia more than I ever had before. I see poor special education students that will never be able to be empowered and rich special education students that will never have to want. I also understand that all students have value, regardless of their disability or lack of disability, culture, attractiveness, wealth, or status in society. Why aren't all students taught that idea?

Special education teachers are very special teachers. I wonder if I am that special?

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