Volume 2, Issue 1

Whole Schooling Consortium

International Journal of Whole Schooling

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(2) including all;

(3) providing authentic, multi-level instruction;

(4) building community;

(5) supporting learning; and

(6) partnering with parents and the community.

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The Journal seeks to discuss issues relevant to Whole Schooling, with contributions from a variety of stakeholders including students, parents, academics, educators, and administrators.

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"We Have to Start with Inclusion and Work it Out as We Go": Purposeful Inclusion for Non-Verbal Students with Autism

Christi Kasa-Hendrickson and Paula Kluth

Abstract

In this qualitative study we analyzed the experiences of five teachers who were actively committed to practicing inclusion and seeking strategies to provide access and opportunity within the general education classroom. Findings from a long-term qualitative study suggested that teachers' thoughtful planning and systematic teaching created successful educational experiences for six non-verbal students with autism. Teachers engaged in the following principles when supporting the successful inclusion of non-verbal students with autism: establishing the community, making classrooms accessible, and working through challenges.

Introduction

In this study we describe the intentional practices of successful inclusive education teachers for primary-aged non-verbal students with autism. At the onset of this study we were interested in how teachers, committed to desegregating special education, carried out the daily task of teaching in an inclusive classroom. Although access to the general education classroom has become common for some students with disabilities in some parts of the country (Biklen, 1992; Kliewer, Fitzgerald, Meyer-Mork, Hartmann, English-Sand, & Raschke, in press; Schwarz & Bettenhausen, 2000; Sapona & Winterman, 2002; Udvari-Solner & Keyes, 2000; Wagner, 2000) non-verbal students with autism continue to experience overwhelming segregation from participation in the general education classroom (Ginsberg, 2003; Kliewer & Landis, 1999; Kliewer & Biklen, 2001; Pikik, McComas, LaFlamme, 2002). According to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs 24th Annual Report to Congress (2002), 50.38% of students labeled with autism spend at least 60% of their day in a segregated setting. An additional 14.45% of students labeled with autism spend 21–60% of their day in segregated settings (p. A 158). As these numbers would suggest, the opportunities for students with autism to experience membership in the inclusive classroom are limited.

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We entered this study interested in how teachers make inclusion *work* for a group of students who commonly experience exclusion (see U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs 24th Annual Report to Congress 2002). Gaining an understanding of the *process* that teachers who thoughtfully and purposefully engage in has the potential to inform the field of special education and specifically to help educators identify the thoughts, beliefs, and practices associated with successful inclusive schooling.

Method

This qualitative study is an analysis of the experiences of five successful teachers committed to educating students with autism in the inclusive classroom. We set out to focus specifically on teachers who worked with non-verbal students with autism rather than the broad category of autism spectrum disorders primarily because the competence of students is often in question; they are often considered the most challenging of students to include in the general education classroom.

While students with autism are widely excluded from general education classrooms within the United States, in the school district where we conducted this research, non-verbal students with autism were commonly included in the general education classroom. Beginning in the mid 1970's, parents and local university professors worked with schools in this district to begin constructing general education classrooms to support the placement of students with autism and others with significant disabilities. Due to this movement toward inclusive classrooms, most teachers in this district were accustomed to this arrangement and these practices.

In this study, organized as an interpretivist narrative (Ferguson, Ferguson, &Taylor, 1992), we examined the inclusive classroom practices of five elementary school teachers who have committed themselves to educating students with and without disabilities. Continuing within the tradition of "optimistic research" (Kliewer et al., in press; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998), we intentionally sought out teachers who would represent positive examples of what inclusive education might look like. In other words, we were interested in studying what works for successful teachers

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Participants

This study took place in a diverse, mid-size urban city within the United States. Data collection was conducted over the course of one school year and included two school sites, five teachers, and six students with autism (see table 1). Teachers involved in this study had experience teaching both special and general education. Two of the teachers (Lisa Tyler and Michelle Lee) co-taught full time and two of the teachers (Jordan Mills and Margo Reed) co-taught part time. Jackie Holder taught her second grade classroom by herself. The teachers all had previous experience teaching inclusive classrooms and utilizing multiple formats of instruction including whole-class discussions, small-group activities, cooperative learning, project and theme-based instruction, and workshops.

The students involved in this study all had been labeled with autism and mental retardation. Some of these learners spoke single words and phrases from time to time however, their utterances tended to be short and repetitive in nature. At times, the teachers understood the communicative intent of their students, but many times they did not. Further, all of the students utilized a combination of sign language, picture symbols, and typing as a communication method. The students involved in this study had been included with their non-disabled peers in educational settings since preschool.

In preliminary research, ten teachers were observed and interviewed, but after several observations and interviews with all ten of the teachers, five teachers were chosen for the study based on the following criteria: placement for the student with autism was seen as permanent; teachers spoke of their support and belief in inclusive education—they were not debating whether or not inclusion was a good idea; and teachers viewed non-verbal students with autism as competent and included them in the academic life of the classroom.

Semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately one hour in length, were conducted to determine the teachers' commitment to inclusive educational practices. The number of interviews varied based on teacher availability and researcher interest. Through purposeful sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2002), we narrowed our focus to five teachers in three classrooms from two different school sites. Table 1 includes information on (a) teacher's name, (b) current level of certification, (c) current grade taught, (d) the non-verbal students with autism who were included in their class, (e) number of interviews conducted, and (f) number of observations. Strict confidentiality has been maintained. All names have been changed.

Table 1: Participant Information

Teacher Name	Teacher Certification	Current Grade Taught	Student with autism	# of Interviews	# of observations
Margo Reed	El.Ed/ Spec Ed.	Kindergarten	Anna / 6 yrs David / 6 yrs	6	32
Jordan Mills	El.Ed/ Spec Ed.	Kindergarten	Same as above	6	18
Jackie Holder	El.Ed/ Spec Ed.	Second	Alex / 9yrs Shantel / 9yrs	6	34
Michelle Lee	El.Ed/ Spec Ed.	First	Sam / 7yrs Jen / 7yrs	6	30
Lisa Tyler	El.Ed/ Spec Ed.	First	Same as above	6	30

Data Procedures

In the tradition of qualitative research, we entered the field where teachers were actively engaged in the daily practice of educating non-verbal students with autism together with students without disabilities. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2002) "Qualitative research is frequently called *naturalistic* because the researcher frequents places where the events he or she is interested in naturally occur" (p. 4). As participant observers our goal was to unobtrusively spend extended amounts of time interacting and observing in the classrooms (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Over one school year, we visited each classroom weekly during various times of the day. Further, we conducted formal interviews with each teacher monthly for the first three months and then every other month for the duration of the study. Each participant observation session lasted about two hours and each interview approximately one hour. Following each observation and interview we wrote detailed descriptive field notes. As the data collection neared completion, over 1800 pages of field notes had been typed.

Data Analysis

During data collection, themes regarding successful teaching practices in inclusive classrooms emerged. As the field notes were coded and analyzed, primary and secondary codes were constructed. Analysis of the data proceeded inductively (Bogdan & Biklen, 2002) and was conducted on an on-going basis throughout the study (Richardson, 2000). From the very beginning, analysis of each participant observation and/or interview informed the questions posed at subsequent interviews; and researchers encouraged the participants to actively participate in the ongoing process of analysis. As we constructed and analyzed our field notes, memos, and interview transcripts, we shared the actual notes as well as analytic themes and categories with participants. Teachers often commented on descriptive vignettes of their classroom activities, providing more insight into their decision making process. Throughout the entire process of conducting this study, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously using the constant comparative method as a strategy (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Findings

In order to create successful inclusive classrooms teachers adopted transformative attitudes. The teachers desired inclusion, believed that they were creating important social change, and worked daily to translate their inclusive ideology into classroom practice. These educators also believed that their orientation and beliefs impacted their ability to support and educate learners; they believed that inclusive schooling was possible and clearly articulated their desire to create inclusive classrooms:

> I believe in inclusive education because first of all the world isn't separate. I mean unfortunately in some ways it is but that's what we are working on, changing that. As a teacher I do not have the right to take away something as important as education from any child. (Jordan Mills)

> Teaching an inclusive classroom provides me with the opportunity to do what I think is right. My hope is that society will change its ideas about people with disabilities and inclusion will become the norm. (Margo Reed)

> It should be natural to have kids with autism in the classroom…I think that you should run your classroom in a way that everybody can be included. Look really we have to start with inclusion and work it out as we go. (Jackie Holder)

As these quotes suggest, creating inclusive classrooms was strongly desired by teachers involved in this study. It was from their conscious decision to work toward valued participation that these teachers set out to create successful classrooms. In order to meet their goal of purposeful inclusion, the teachers in this study organized their classrooms around the following dimensions: establishing the community, making classrooms accessible, and working through challenges.

Establishing the Community

Teachers in this study purposefully planned lessons and practiced inclusion from an optimistic point of view. Teachers held the perspective that through engaging in ordinary activities such as reading, writing, and idea sharing that students would grow and benefit in ways that would be impossible to predict prior to their opportunity to engage in these events. Teachers designed a variety of strategies that supported not only the learning of the non-verbal students with autism, but of the non-disabled students in the classroom as well.

Caring for one another.

Teachers established classrooms where students made decisions to reach out to their classmates, independent of any adult instruction. One afternoon as Margo Reed, a teacher in an inclusive kindergarten classroom, gathered the students to go to centers, she called, "David" and then, "Justice." As the boys' names were called, Justice stood up and signed "Stand up" to David. Justice continued and said, "David, come on. It's our turn to go to the writing center." As Justice said this, he reached his hand out toward David. David took Justice's hand and stood up next to him. The boys continued to hold hands as they walked over toward the table. When they reached the table, Justice pulled out the chair for David and said, "David, sit down we're gonna do this now." David sat down, picked up his pencil and began to write. At no time during the activity did an adult direct the supports or collaboration between the boys; the boys' names were called and Justice, knowing that David had difficulty getting up from the rug and over to the table, helped his classmate.

" I hear people ask the question, 'Should we teach values in school?' This to me is a silly question. We do teach values and I feel that it is absolutely important to teach equity, respect, and acceptance. So I work on it every day." "

Margo Reed often modeled the type of caring that was demonstrated by Justice. Pertinent to this situation, Margo had modeled and taught students that an outreached hand could help David initiate his movement. At the beginning of the school year, students would say, "David does not want to come with me." Margo explained, "It is not that David does not want to come with you… he has trouble getting going sometimes." In modeling this type of assistance and helping students interpret David's lack of movement, Margo set expectations for caring that the students adopted and practiced throughout the school year.

Jackie Holder, a second-grade teacher, also deliberately created strategies to encourage the students to care for one another within her classroom. In addition to teaching academics, Jackie felt that it was very important for her to model and directly teach her students to interact with each other in caring ways. She explained, "I hear people ask the question, 'Should we teach values in school?' This to me is a silly question. We do teach values and I feel that it is absolutely important to teach equity, respect, and acceptance. So I work on it every day." This commitment to values was evident in the creation and the daily articulation of a class pledge. The pledge read:

I owe it to myself to learn more everyday. I owe it to myself to correct my mistakes. I owe it to myself and others to clean up after myself. I owe it to myself and others to use gentle hands, a gentle voice and gentle words. I will be a winner today. I will walk away from trouble. I will be a kind friend. I will not hurt others on the inside or the outside. I will be a good listener today. I think I can. I know I can.

The class recited the pledge each morning and throughout the day the pledge was a reference point for discussion when conflicts arose. Students were often overheard commenting on the pledge. Remarks such as, "Remember the pledge, we have to clean up," and "We forgot to say the pledge today" were common. This vision that the class created gave learners common goal; students learn to work together and to treat each other with kindness and respect.

In these classrooms the teachers had set out to purposefully create classroom environments where students would be expected to act in caring ways. Never was there a time where taunting and name-calling were accepted. Any deviations were discussed thoroughly. The teacher did not ignore hurtful comments or behavior. Teachers spoke of respect, treated all with kindness and understanding, modeled this daily, and expected the students to do the same. This type of expectation for caring not only promoted the equitable treatment of students with disabilities, but of all of the students in the class.

"I told them that just because they don't talk that doesn't mean that they are not really smart and that they have trouble moving their bodies. But, that all happens at the beginning of the school year. Now it is not a big deal. "

Answering the question, "What is autism?"

One aspect of a supportive inclusive class is being prepared to respond to the question, "What is autism?" Teachers made decisions of how to respond to this question in different ways. Within these classrooms students periodically asked about autism and certain associated behaviors such as grunting, screaming, and jumping. "Anna hasn't even learned to talk yet," commented a student in Margo Reed's kindergarten class. This statement by Anna prompted us to explore how teachers respond to questions students bring about why the students with autism engage, respond, or behave in certain ways.

Students in Jackie Holder's classroom made statements similar to the one above early in the school year. As the year continued, however, the questions diminished. The students moved from asking questions of concern (i.e., "Why did Shantel try to bite you?", "When will Anna learn that we don't scream") to making comments of acceptance and support (i.e., "Sometimes David just jumps a lot," "I can talk with Shantel she just talks different, that's all").

Students' shift from questions of concern to comments of acceptance seemed to be a direct result of the teachers' conscious effort to address these questions and model a caring understanding of disability. At the beginning of the school year, Margo Reed decided that she would hold a meeting with her students while David and Anna were in the speech therapist's office. She explained:

> I just wanted the students to have a time to ask questions, to talk openly. I told them what autism was and that David and Anna are just like everyone else but they just can't talk. I told them that just because they don't talk that doesn't mean that they are not really smart and that they have trouble moving their bodies. But, that all happens at the beginning of the school year. Now it is not a big deal.

While Margo Reed felt that it was best to have an initial discussion with the class while David and Anna were out of the room, other impromptu discussions arose while David and Anna were in the room. One day as the students gathered for morning circle time, one student asked, "Why don't kids with autism learn to talk?" Margo answered by saying, "Well some people with autism use their voice to talk and others use computers, and still others use sign language. There are lots of people who don't use their voice to talk." Margo later commented on this situation by saying, "I always feel awkward about this. David and Anna have no way to communicate how they think about these questions. I am really guessing and answering for them. It is a problem that I am not happy about."

Margo realized that having discussions about autism without David and Anna in the class excluded their voice from the conversation. She wanted to create an environment in the classroom where students felt like they could ask questions. At the same time, Margo had difficulty answering those questions. One of Margo's strategies, when asked a question that she had trouble answering was to say, "I don't know." One afternoon a student asked, "Why does Anna flap her hand in front of her eye?" Margo responded and said, "You know I really don't know. I guess the only way I could know is to ask Anna." To Margo, saying, "I don't know" instead of guessing seemed more accurate. She wanted students to feel free to ask questions, but she also wanted students to know that there are certain questions that only David and Anna could answer. Margo's decision to address students' questions and model respectful discussion of disability are practices that bring the topic of disability out of the margins and make it central to the class.

Jackie Holder encountered similar questions at the beginning of the school year, but decided this year that she was not going to have a special meeting as she had done in the past. Instead, she decided to discuss student questions as they arose and put them in the context of treating all people with respect. Jackie shared that in the past she conducted a, "special meeting when the kids with autism were out of the room", but after some reflection she began to ask herself, "What am I teaching by having this separate meeting?" Jackie realized that having a separate meeting might work against her desire for the class to accept students with autism as a normal part of a classroom. She believed that talking specifically about autism when the students were out of the room created a sense that these students were outsiders. Jackie knew that having a classmate with autism was a new experience for many of her students and that she would have to find subtle ways to imbed their interest in the curriculum.

At the beginning of the school year a student asked, "Where does [autism] all come from? I mean, can we get autism?" On this day, in the middle of the classroom chaos Jackie Holder responded, "No. Autism is basically a language problem. Kids have trouble getting their words out, but they are in there and what we have to do is be patient and find ways to help our friends communicate. Are you interested in autism?" The student responded, "Yes, I would like to learn more about it." Jackie offered, "Why don't you go and put that topic on our interest board?" On the chalkboard, off to the side, was the title, "Topics we are interested in learning more about." Underneath the title were topics such as, volcanoes, democrats, rules of four square, put downs, and now, autism. Jackie had decided that she wanted to find a way to incorporate all of the topics that the students said they want to learn about. She explained to them that when they were truly interested in a topic they were to put it on the board and that the class would spend some time learning more about this at a later time. Jackie had also planned a guest speaker for every topic that the students suggested. This seemed a particularly natural way to have a person with autism come and speak to the class. In doing this, Jackie worked to change the talk about autism from being about the student with a disability to a broader activity-based idea where the entire class discussed a topic of interest. The guest speaker became simply another person present in the classroom who would help the students learn more about an interesting topic.

Making Classrooms Accessible

The teachers in this study viewed teaching as dynamic and thoughtful work. They considered "problems" opportunities to adjust and redesign lessons, routines, and structures in the classroom. Jackie Holder shared what she loved about teaching, "If you get hit with a problem there's always a way to make it work. Nothing is insurmountable…but that's what I love, the problem-solving piece of teaching." In creating classrooms that responded to all of their students' needs teachers used responsive materials, cooperative learning groupings, and a schedule to comfort and guide learners.

Engaging learners with diverse and responsive materials. When making decisions about classroom organization and lesson design, teachers would often look to materials in order to take into account how non-verbal students with autism could participate. One day while watching Shantel in the reading group, Jackie Holder found a unique way to support Shantel's participation. The group was working on "s" blends (i.e., str, spr, and scr). The students were working with words that were included in their story of the week. As students sat around a table, each took a turn reading a section of the paper in front of them and chose a word that fit the sentence and then identified the blend the word started with. Students in the group did this verbally, picking from a group of words that was provided for them on their worksheet. When it was Shantel's turn she pointed to the words while her neighbor read them out loud. Her sentence read, "The boy ___ the guitar." Because Shantel could not accurately circle the word on the worksheet or write it in the box provided, Jackie had written the possible choices out on index cards. Each word was written in a different color. She set them out before Shantel and said, "Ok Shantel, I want you to pick the right word and hand it to Lauren (a student sitting next to Shantel)." Shantel began to look at each of the words. Jackie continued to encourage her selection by saying, "That's right Shantel I see you looking, very good. I see you stopping on a word. It looks like you are looking at the right word. Pick up the right word. Pick it up." Shantel reached over and picked up the word strummed. She then handed it to Lauren. Jackie continued, "Shantel what blend does strummed start with?" Jackie placed three different blends on the table. Jackie continued to verbally encourage Shantel and said, "That's right you're looking those three blends over. Good looking. Pick up the correct blend." Shantel picked up str and handed it to her neighbor. Shantel took three turns in all during this activity she got each word and blend correct. The use of the large, bold, colorful cards when coupled with the very careful verbal encouragement from Jackie supported Shantel's involvement and successful participation in this activity.

Not all of the responsive materials used by teachers were directly connected to curriculum and instruction. For example, Michelle Lee and Lisa Tyler, two first-grade teachers, responded to student differences and needs by integrating a classroom sensory box. On a shelf off to the side of the classroom was a box full of Koosh™ balls, strips of soft material, balls with fuzz on the outside, unifex cubes, straws, small stuffed animals and a variety of other tactile objects. Throughout the day students were allowed to select and "use" objects in the box. One day while watching the students gather for morning meeting one of the teachers handed Sam a Koosh™ ball. He sat through morning meeting brushing the large orange ball of strings between his fingers.

"We started the box because some of the other kids said that they would like to try holding something too."

Lisa explained that she introduced the sensory box initially to support Sam but that the adaptation proved to have additional benefits:

> At the beginning of the year Sam could not stay seated through morning meeting and his mom suggested that we give him something to hold. She sent in the Koosh™ ball. Ever since then he has sat through meeting just fine. We started the box because some of the other kids said that they would like to try holding something too.

Throughout the day many of the students in these classes reached for items in the sensory box and "used" them during classroom lessons. None of the interactions with objects created a disruption in the class and the learners accessing the objects appeared to appreciate and profit from the use of the "fidget items."

Utilizing cooperative groups. Michelle Lee and Lisa Tyler felt that cooperative learning groups not only worked to build the close community they desired in their classroom but also enhanced the learning experiences for the class. When they started teaching, they arranged their class in rows with the students' desks separated. Michelle commented on this, "You know, like before we'd have rows or separate desks. Then we decided that this really prevented the kids from working together and we'd rather have tables and get the kids communicating with each other." For Michelle and Lisa, grouping the students together allowed for a different style of learning so that students could communicate and problem solve together.

In Michelle and Lisa's class, students participated and were organized in flexible learning clubs. There were learning clubs for math, reading, and other academic activities. The members of the clubs changed every two months. Lisa explained, "Learning clubs are a group of kids that are sitting at the same table that have created a name for themselves, they take ownership of their whole group activities." The teachers created learning clubs to enhance student communication and to promote cooperation.

In creating these learning clubs, Michelle and Lisa were conscious of the stigmatization students could feel if they were placed in a fixed ability group; the teachers felt such groups would restrict the students' opportunity to learn from all classmates and feared that some learners in the "lower" groups might believe that they were less capable than others. Michelle and Lisa did not want their students to feel that their potential was limited, therefore they made groups fluid, changing them often so that students would not take on particular roles. Students would come together to work on a particular skill and then break apart to work on otherthings. Michelle explained that they want to avoid the stigmatization that accompanies the label of the "low group" and that they work to focus on the child's strengths. Lisa explained, "We don't want kids to say, 'You're smarter than I am.' It helps to not build that." By paying close attention to how the groups were organized and who moved in and out of the groups, Michelle and Lisa hoped to work against the static labels that often came when groups were created according to perceived ability.

Jackie Holder also utilized cooperative groups in her second-grade class as a way to focus on students' abilities. Jackie's classroom was often alive with activity. One day, students were sprawled out on the floor with clipboards and note pads, discussing the topic at hand. Some students sat at back tables together flipping through books, while others worked at their desks. For this particular lesson, each group was assigned research questions based on a particular country in Europe. This assignment was part of a "tour of the continents" unit. This month was Europe. Shantel's group was focused on Italy. As a part of this group, Shantel and another student Emma worked on a large magnetic globe. It was their job to recreate the continent of Europe on this large magnetic globe. As Shantel and Emma worked together, Shantel would pick up the magnetic pieces that were arranged on the rug then look at the model that the two girls had laid out on the floor. They would then proceed to place the piece on the large globe, getting it in the right place each time. At the end of the time they had created a nice model of Europe, reporting back to their group the neighboring countries they had located. Jackie Holder shared that she felt it was important for Shantel to be successful and have an opportunity to actively participate in activities with her peers. In order to create this, Jackie considered how utilizing cooperative groups would create situations in which Shantel might participate:

> I have found that sometimes throughout the day Shantel needs to work on her own with the other kids, you know without an adult. Also I want her to realize that she is very good at doing some things on her own. So I asked myself, "What is Shantel good at on her own?" Puzzles. She is great at puzzles. I knew another teacher had this magnetic globe so I asked if I could borrow it. Shantel needs to learn about Europe. It is important for her to have the same academic experiences and I might as well incorporate what she is good at to do it.

By planning ahead and focusing on Shantel's strengths, Jackie Holder made decisions that would encourage inclusion.

"Jackie's classroom was often alive with activity. One day, students were sprawled out on the floor with clipboards and note pads, discussing the topic at hand. Some students sat at back tables together flipping through books, while others worked at their desks."

Offering comfort with a schedule.

In an effort to respond to their students' need for consistency teachers organized their classrooms so that there were predictable daily routines. Each morning in Jackie Holder's second-grade class, Alex entered the classroom and headed for the chalkboard. Jackie greeted him and joined him at the board. Alex then said, "Schedule." Jackie then asked questions that had predictable answers and allowed Alex to fill in the events of the day. For example, Jackie Holder said, "First we will take out our…" and Alex replied, "homework." Jackie continued and said, "And then we will do…" Alex replied, "reading groups." This activity continued, with Jackie providing a framed sentence for Alex to complete until the entire schedule for the day was on the board. While talking through this activity together, Jackie took her finger and wrote the word on the chalkboard. Alex followed this faint mark and used this guide to write the word on the board. At the end of the activity, Alex then read the schedule to the class. During transition times throughout the day Alex referred back to the schedule. One day Alex repeated, "It's time for snack, it's time for snack." Jackie then pointed Alex in the direction of the schedule and said, "Check the schedule. It is 10:00. What is it time for?" Alex replied, "Oh Math." This reminder and refocusing on the events to come provided Alex with a support that allowed him to shift his attention and to join his math group and continue with the class activities.

Similarly, Jordan Mills and Margo Reed worked together to create a classroom schedule. At the beginning of the school year, David and Anna were having a difficult time adjusting to the classroom. They ran out of the room. They repeatedly talked about snack time and going home. As Jordan and Margo discussed how to work through this difficult time, they decided that it might help if David and Anna knew the schedule of daily activities. Margo made up a daily schedule and decided to include it as a part of the opening each day. She wrote each activity on a sentence strip and placed a corresponding picture next to the word. The teacher then glued Velcro to the sentence strips and placed them down the side of the chalkboard. The events could be moved if the schedule changed.

Margo decided to present the schedule as a choral reading so that all the students would take on an active role. One morning she began by saying, "Ok let's take a look at the schedule for today, we'll start the day with…", she paused and the whole class chanted, "Opening." Margo and the students continued chanting each event of the day. While Margo cued the students to say the various events of the day she pointed to the words on the sentence strips.

With the schedule available as a reference point, Margo and Jordan directed Anna and David to the schedule when they seemed anxious about upcoming activities such as snack or recess time. Margo also said, "I noticed David looking at the schedule throughout the day. Sometimes I would catch him standing next to it and pointing to the activity that would come next." In this classroom, the schedule seemed to serve as tool to calm both Anna and David. It is difficult to determine exactly what created this change in Anna's and David's behavior, but along with time to adjust to a new environment and teacher, the use of the class schedule appeared to be an integral part of supporting David and Anna throughout the day.

Working Through Challenges

At times, the existing practices and structures of the classroom (i.e., transition from activities, whole class instruction) presented challenges to David, Anna, Alex, Shantel, Jen, and Sam. These challenging times often proved to be a time of flexibility, restructuring, and growth. In working through challenging situations such as biting, scratching, screaming, running away, and student self-abuse, the teachers made several important decisions in how they went about supporting students with autism. First, the teachers worked through challenges by "letting it be"; that is they reconstructed what was traditionally thought of a normal behavior in the classroom. Educators also worked through difficulties by following the student's lead.

Reconstructing normalcy: Letting it be.

One day in Margo Reed's classroom, as the students arranged their pattern blocks, practiced forming their letters, and read their stories, Anna was observed humming to herself. Occasionally this humming became quite loud, however, other students in the classroom did not seem distracted by the sound. In fact not one student appeared distracted by or even particularly aware of Anna's humming. Margo commented on this and said,

> It has all become a normal part of the class now. You know Anna hums and sometimes she screams. When she screams too loud we can usually calm her down by talking to her about what we are doing but sometimes she takes a walk or goes for a swing and comes back in and finishes what we are doing.

The humming and singing that were common occurrences in Margo's class were not seen as disruptions, but as a part of how some students interacted in the class. Many non-verbal students with autism in this study often hummed, sang, flapped their hands, jumped, and rocked. Their teachers responded to these movements or actions out of support and understanding. The choice to allow these movements to continue and to create classroom experiences where all different types of movements became normal was an important decision when considering the creation of an inclusive classroom.

As Margo Reed, Jordan Mills, and Jackie Holder engaged in this struggle, they rethought their practices and reassessed how they supported students. Through these often-difficult times, student participation and placement in the classroom was never at risk. Conversely, it was the teachers' practice that was in question. In Margo's effort to support Anna she began by trying to stop Anna from humming. Margo shared that she thought that it might be disruptive to the class. Yet after many failed attempts to stop Anna she asked herself, "Was it really a disruption?" Margo began to play soft classical music in the background and Anna and some other students began to hum along. Reflecting on this situation Margo shared, "I needed to think about what was going on with the humming and not just try to stop it." Sensitive reflection provided time to re-think assumptions about behavior and create new strategies for the classroom. In these instances, teachers focused on how to change their teaching practices in instead of considering ways to change student behavior.

"David's crying was seen as an emotion to be understood and to be sensitive to, not an act of noncompliance to be punished. "

Following students' lead.

Jordan Mills understood that David experienced struggles from time to time and she found that providing sensitive support early on in the situation would help David to be able to rejoin the class. One afternoon, while Jordan was working with David during a drawing activity, he began to bounce up and down in his seat and make some low grunting noises. He then started to make a soft crying sound and proceeded to pound his head against the table a few times. Immediately, Jordan provided him with personal attention and an opportunity to take a physical break. She said quietly, "Oh David you seem a little upset why don't we go out here for a break, we can get a drink of water." This subtle intervention appeared to be a natural, proactive strategy to offer support.

Jordan legitimized David's behavior when she said, "You seem a little upset." David's crying was seen as an emotion to be understood and to be sensitive to, not an act of noncompliance to be punished. After David walked outside and got a drink he came back, appearing to be happy. This success gave the teacher new insight into how to support David when he seemed to be upset. Progressively throughout the school year David initiated periodic breaks by signing, "drink." His aide then took him out for a quick drink and David re-entered the class and resumed the activity. David continued to become upset at times and would cry and bang his head. When this happened the teachers responded sympathetically and provided him with some personal attention. Further, they always allowed David to take a break and get a drink of water, take a walk outside, or go for a swing.

Jackie Holder demonstrated this same commitment to "following the student" when she addressed the problem of Shantel biting the classroom paraeducator. Jackie felt confused by Shantel's biting and wasn't sure what was causing her to do this. She explained, "It seems so quick and impulsive." Jackie decided to try to support Shantel by giving her purposeful breaks throughout the day. For example, Jackie would often ask Shantel if she would run a note to the office or deliver some supplies to another teacher. Jackie also suggested that while Shantel was out of the classroom she could stop at the drinking fountain. While Shantel continued to experience difficulties on occasion, Jackie made sure that Shantel had at least one daily break. The scheduled breaks helped to reduce the number of time biting occurred.

Michelle Lee and Lisa Tyler also encouraged their students to make decisions throughout the day that would support their participation in the classroom. Sam often shut the classroom door when it was left open. Most often in the morning, the door to the classroom would be left open. As soon as everyone entered the room, Sam routinely rushed over and closed the door. Throughout the day, if at any point the door was left open, Sam quickly ran toward it and shut it, promptly returning to his work. A student in the classroom explained Sam's behavior this way, "Sam always closes the door for me; I don't like the noise from the hallway." This student appreciated that Sam kept the door closed and saw that he performed a valuable task. Michelle also explained how watching this behavior and learning from it helped her to positively support Sam, "I think that the noise and distraction of people walking by might bother him so I let him keep track of keeping it closed." Further, throughout the day, Sam often stood at the closed door. When this happened, his aide asked him if he needed a break. If Sam signed yes, they went to the hall for a drink, a short walk, or a trip to the bathroom. His aide commented, "We let Sam let us know what he needs."

Discussion

Professional literature regarding the education of students with autism is steeped in controversy about which instructional technology will best serve the educational needs of learners with this label (For a discussion of instructional practices for students with autism see Dahle, 2003; Kasa-Hendrickson, 2004; Kliewer et al in press; Kluth, 2003; Kluth & Darmody-Latham, 2003; Simpson-Richard, de-Boer-Ott, & Smith-Myles, 2003). The purpose of this research was not to understand which current strategy for teaching students with autism would work best in the inclusive classroom, but to closely describe the active work of teachers engaged in educating individuals with autism. The teachers involved in this study sought to know their students well and through this process design instruction and supports that would serve to connect their students to the curriculum and to their peers.

Although there are recent cases of successful inclusive education for non-verbal students with autism (Simpson-Richard, deBoer-Ott, Smith-Myles, 2003; Harrow & Dunlap, 2001; Kluth, 2003), inclusion for these students is neither a common occurrence in our schools, nor widely written about. Some notable work done by Oppenheim (1974) takes a rather progressive stance and discusses the importance of the teacher when educating students with autism. Oppenheim places the responsibility of education on the teacher. She states teachers' inability to recognize students with autism as learners, would be a "criminal waste of possible human potential" (Oppenheim, 1974, p.91). Oppenheim goes on to state that,

> Low teacher expectation in this regard is a self fulfilling prophecy…based on the child's atypical functioning and his frequently low IQ score (if a score is even obtainable), teachers and other professionals draw inferences that preclude their even attempting to teach the child anything as complex as, for example, reading. (1974, p.91)

Teachers described in this study saw the nonverbal students with autism as not only valued members of their class, but also as active learners of the general education curriculum. Inseparable to teachers' ability to create successful strategies was their desire to do so. Their vision of what was possible for students with disabilities and their willingness to change and shape their lessons to meet the need of all students was central work in their inclusive classrooms.

Lessons Learned from Successful Teachers Experiences

When teachers learned that they were going to have non-verbal students with autism as members of their class they did not resist restructuring lessons and trying out different teaching strategies in order to ensure participation of all of their students. Among many other lessons, the teachers learned to make inclusion unconditional, to use multiple adaptations, and to understand inclusion as a process.

Teachers involved in this study saw inclusion as unconditional. That is, when students became a member of their class, they were not there on a trial basis. Students were not in jeopardy of being sent away because of a perceived problem or struggle regarding behavior or academic progress; these learners were seen as members of the class. Teachers worked to tackle educational obstacles within the context of the general education classroom.

As an integral process of their work, teachers involved in this study tried a variety of adaptations to create successful lessons and community in their class. Teachers took a careful look at their materials, lesson formats, and various options for student participation to create successful inclusion. Teachers refrained from static thinking that would lead them to maintain their traditional practice. Indeed the students in this study would have struggled in classrooms where student participation was limited to paper and pencil tasks. Instead teachers saw inclusion as an opportunity for growth, change, and exploration.

The teachers involved in this study understood that the inclusion of students with autism in their classrooms would develop *as* they worked at making it happen. They were committed to inclusion as a messy process, filled with challenges. As teachers learned about their students and created lessons, they knew that their strategies and ideas would change. There were indeed struggles involved in this work, but teachers accepted this and felt that this was an integral and even necessary part of teaching a diverse classroom.

In order to focus this research on teaching practices, we have attempted to highlight the driving principles behind the teachers' success. From these educators, we can learn that successful inclusion for nonverbal students with autism happens when teachers view inclusive schooling as the work they do daily (instead of as something that will or will not work for a particular learner); see these learners as a catalyst for change; and create a classroom space where learning is nurtured and expected. For the teachers in this study putting this philosophy into practice meant establishing a cooperative and caring community, making classrooms comfortable and accessible for all, and working through difficult moments and welcoming struggle as a vehicle for learning. Teachers' practices, in essence, mirror the words of Biklen (1992) who suggested that we seek out teachers who "fiercely desire inclusion" when designing inclusive classrooms.

> The mere physical presence of students with disabilities in schools will not suffice. Grudging acceptance of integration is by definition inadequate. What is needed rather are schools with *fierce* commitment to inclusion, where students with disabilities are not only accepted but actually recruited. (1992, p.142)

The teachers involved in this study held such a "fierce commitment" and by translating this philosophy into daily practice were able to successfully support learners with significant communication, learning, and social differences in their diverse inclusive classrooms.

"The teachers involved in this study understood that the inclusion of students with autism in their classrooms would develop as they worked at making it happen. "

Dr. Christi Kasa-Hendrickson is Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Chapman University. Dr. Paula Kluth is an independent consultant and scholar in Oak Park, Illinois.

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