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Kathy Adams

Abstract:

Observations made in fourth grade classrooms in a neighborhood urban school after the implementation of the Ohio Proficiency test (OPT) demonstrated the loss of one schools exemplary inclusion models. In addition, identified special education students may have been harmed and there was the possibility that the misplacement of some students occurred. Literature warns of the possibility that high stakes tests, like the OPT may increase the number of identified special education students.

Inclusion No More

In these days of high stakes accountability some repercussions are not immediately apparent. Observations made in fourth grade classrooms in a neighborhood urban school after implementation of the Ohio Proficiency test (OPT) demonstrated the loss of one schools exemplary inclusion models. In addition, identified special education students may have been harmed and some students may have been misplaced. Furthermore, literature warns of the possibility that high stakes tests, like the OPT, may increase the number of identified special education students.

At least as far back as 1992, Allington and McGill-Frazen warned that high stakes tests might harm instructional practices, increase special education placement, and grade retention. In 1999, Ruediger and Lorange found that the increasing number of students being served in special education programs had increased dramatically. They argued that the reforms movement with the emphasis on state achievement tests had caused a deficit perspective about children leading to more special education placement. They warned that educators are being caught in this test culture and as such, cannot address individual student needs and interests. Furthermore, a supposition was made in Texas that once the high stakes accountability TAAS scores included special education students scores they would lower the overall average of the scores. When this did not happen a study was conducted to find out why. What the data demonstrated was that the percent number of special education students increased, especially among minority students and males. In addition, a higher percentage of African American students were exempted from the actual reporting of scores (Linton, 2000).

Not all of the literature contains bad news. Kugelmass (2000) wrote about a school that continued inclusion in spite of the pressures of accountability and standards. Through numerous decisions, trainings, and a commitment to all students, the staff utilized a narrative process that included meeting with each child and parent to create educational goals, not unlike an IEP. They wrote about a new superintendent who interpreted the low test scores of the school as evidence that the narrative, individualized process was not working. He then ordered a skills based checklist even though the school was not referring any students for special education placement because they preferred to take care of all students by this narrative format and in individual classrooms. After receiving a three year waiver from the skills based checklist, the staff again came together and made modifications to the narrative process and as a result these changes, while maintaining inclusion, have resulted in increased test scores.

All of this literature became pertinent while observing in some fourth grade classrooms after the

implementation of the Ohio Proficiency Test (OPT). The OPT is a high stakes standardized test given to fourth, sixth and ninth grade students in the state of Ohio. It has high stakes because a student can have a diploma withheld and a school or school district can be sanctioned or rewarded based on the test scores. The original reason given for testing fourth grade students was to have an early intervention process in place to provide needed assistance before the ninth grade. What in actuality happened is the test scores became a way for schools to retain students and to increase pressure on schools to perform on this test. From my research this pressure has led to numerous negative consequences.

This research took place in an urban school in an Ohio school district. The school description will be limited due to the need to protect its identity, teachers and administrator. The school has an over 90% free lunch rate, over a 50% Appalachian, Caucasian and African American student population and is an elementary neighborhood school. The neighborhood school is defined as a school that any student can attend as long as they are in the attendance area. I had been involved in the school since 1994 and had encouraged the placement of student teachers in the school due to the inclusion model and support for special education students.

This was the inclusionary model during the 1994-1995 school year. There were three special education teachers for the primary and intermediate level. The primary model had designated teachers for first to third grade that were special education homerooms. The special education teacher and the homeroom teachers worked hand in hand and served all students. For example, the special education teacher would work with large groups, small groups or with one child. In addition, she supplied additional materials and resources for the homeroom teachers.

The intermediate inclusion model had one special education teacher serving as the inclusion teacher assisting in and out of classrooms and the other taught a subject with fourth, fifth and sixth grade regular and special education students that needed additional help. The most noticeable observation was that when you walked into a classroom you had no idea who was a special education student. I also observed special education teachers working with and teaching large groups while homeroom teachers worked individually with a student or small group. The message I received was that these are our kids and we all have ownership for them. Lastly, all teachers worked on the students Individualized Education Plans.

I returned officially to the school to begin research during the 1999 - 2000 school year to get fourth grade teachers' perspectives about the OPT after the implementation of the retention mandates. I was concerned that retention would increase the already high dropout rates of students in the district. I did not recognize and was personally shocked at the changes in the school. I believe these changes occurred for a multitude of reasons including the pressure on this district from the state which led to the reaction of the district to overhaul report cards, to implement new standards, to mandate the use of prescribed curriculum, and the rewarding and sanctioning of individual schools. The district changes then impacted this school.

One of the changes included standards that were created at each grade level to match the material on the OPT. These standards included an exit year at third, sixth and eighth grade in other words, if a student could not pass the exit standards they were retained. In addition, a report card was created to match the standards. The district also implemented a ranking system for schools of Incentive, Accomplished, Intervention, and Redesign categories based on OPT scores, staff and student attendance, and student retention and dropout rates. Schools placed on Redesign were closed and teachers had to apply to other schools in the district for positions. It is very apparent from the ranking system that the magnet schools and elite high schools in the district performed at the top of the

ranking categories while the neighborhood schools performed at the bottom. One of the reactions to this was that the magnet schools began returning special education students to their home neighborhood school because the perception was that the special education students would lower their test scores. In addition, teachers in neighborhood schools began to transfer to the magnet schools because they were afraid they would end up with the stigma of being in an Intervention or Redesigned school. Furthermore, teachers began transferring out of fourth grade due to the pressure of the test scores and prescribed curriculum. In this neighborhood school the teachers were flooded with test preparation messages. The test was the only thing the administrator talked about or wrote about. The message was in every newsletter and in bulletin boards around the school. Students were no longer allowed to go on field trips because every minute of every day was to be spent on the test. Inclusion was no more. The homeroom teachers that were left no longer felt accountable for special education students or the energy to be accountable.

While conducting this research in fourth grade classrooms the most disturbing observations were the loss of the inclusion models, the mistreatment of diagnosed special education students, and the possible misplacement of some students.

The special education teachers had left the building and those that replaced them did not fully support the inclusion model. Students at the intermediate level were all placed in the fourth grade because of the belief that since they were special education identified that would be the level they could perform. The new prescribed curriculum with individual assessment and placement should have assisted full inclusion but instead contributed to the placement in the fourth grade. The fourth grade classrooms averaged 33 students with 10 special education identified students. These students had multiple diagnoses due to the mass movement from the magnet schools. Almost all of the students in one fourth grade classroom were on different reading levels requiring the teacher with 33 students to try to do the prescribed curriculum program with 33 individual plans. I found that the individualized education plans were not followed which caused continued conflicts and problems. As for the primary level inclusion model because of the pressures and no perceived support the homeroom teachers no longer wanted to be designated special education classrooms.

Numerous reactions to the loss of inclusion and lack of support was what I call babysitting the students on the computer, placing them in desks along the walls of the classroom, giving them low level worksheets or busy work while they were in the homeroom classrooms, and not being allowed to participate in field trips. I observed special education students placed on computers in the room with low level drill and skill programs or placed in desks on the periphery of the room and given low level worksheets to complete while the regular education students were participating in lessons.

This mistreatment continued with field trips. At one point after the implementation of the test fourth grade teachers received a mandate that they would no longer be allowed to take field trips because every moment was to be spent for test preparation. The fourth grade teachers did battle with the school administrator and the teacher decision-making committee to take their students on field trips. Finally they were allowed to take field trips as long as they had something to do with the OPT. After they received this approval I observed and heard the following exchange.

One day I was in one of the teachers' rooms and the administrator walked in. The principal said angrily, "I heard no special ed students are going on the trip." The teacher shot back, "They are not taking the

OPT!" The administrator turned his head toward me, saw me and turned back to her angrily, but in

almost a whisper, said, "You heard me." He then walked out of the room.

When I asked the teachers about the special education students they told me that they could be exempted from the test or they would not pass the test anyway so they really needed to spend their time and energy on the students that could pass. In addition, teachers referred to these special education students as "them" further adding to their mistreatment.

The teachers attitude was compounded by the pressure of the school but I believe also by a Severe Behavioral Handicap student that assaulted a teacher but was allowed to return to school to take the OPT because he was known to have high test scores. The message to the teachers and students was that the test is the only thing that is important.

Lastly, outside the classroom, since many special education students were back serviced in the small classroom, students were eating together, playing together on the playground, and otherwise not interacting with regular education students.

As mentioned previously this school had a very large urban Appalachian population. The white urban Appalachian student has a dropout rate near 100% and they have much higher rates of special education placements and behavioral referrals even over what could be accounted for by socioeconomic status alone. While observing I began to interact with some of these students including observing and having conversations with them about their schoolwork. From these observations I recognized some Appalachian characteristics displayed in some of the students and became concerned that placement in special education may be biased against these students.

Of all of the students, Clara concerned me the most. Clara came from a second generation Appalachian family and still carried her mountain dialect and displayed other Appalachian characteristics. On multiple occasions she would talk to me about what her teacher was teaching even though she was not involved. She displayed quite higher order thinking and comprehension to me. When I found out she was diagnosed as developmentally handicapped with a low IQ I knew something was seriously wrong. When I asked her teachers about why she was sent for special education testing I was told it was because she read and wrote in her dialect, would not talk in class, and at times refused to do anything. I spoke to her mother and found that she could cook at home including reading and following recipes. She also went to the store alone and knew how to make change. When I examined her test scores from an informal reading assessment I found that she was reading at a high level. When I spoke to the psychologist about her testing I was told that she could not name common objects, refused to do some tasks, and could not write. This was definitely not what I observed. It appeared to me that it was easier to test and exempt some students than trying to address their problems. My continued concern is that even more students are misplaced. I worry about Clara and the other students I observed and wonder what will happen to them if they to continue in this environment and curriculum of this school.

Implications

Models of excellence in inclusion should be preserved and shared. I know this was only one school but the implications can still be great because even the harm of one student is too much. Also, as the pressure continues for high stakes national tests and as new IDEA legislation is being discussed a larger problem may exist than what has happened in just this school including creating an education system of have and have nots or those that can pass tests and those that cannot. No doubt the potential is great for the loss of more inclusion models, the misplacement of students, and the abuse, mistreatment, and discrimination of identified special education students.

Since this research was completed this school district has continued to overload neighborhood schools with students with multiple problems and there is a definite elite system of schools. Also, even though the state of Ohio has discontinued the retention factor for fourth grade students this district has continued this practice that could then possibly lead to more misidentified students and poor curriculum. The district has started to mandate that the report card standards match the IEP objectives but this has created other problems because these standards may not be what any student needs.

Suggestions

I do not believe that those that support accountability meant for these negative effects to happen. Today more than ever parents, especially special education parents, must be informed about their child's rights and be aware of what is actually happening in classrooms. Schools have a responsibility to educate all students in a fair, equitable manner. In order to do this teachers and administrators must speak out and be empowered to continue the best pedagogy and curriculum and not succumb to pressures on what they know is academically and morally wrong.

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