

Mainstream Confusion, Resource Boredom

Laura Conrad

At Oliver High School, the average student spends the day bored in mainstream classes, listening to teachers who may or may not provide quality explanations of lessons. Most do the least amount of work possible just to get by, and often end their education with a high school diploma. On the other hand, there are resource rooms, classrooms for students diagnosed with learning disabilities and are classified as having problems that require special attention. The SOS program is a program that has been developed in an LD class setting, but provides the students with opportunities to interact with mentors and gain job experience aside from their standard classes, and a real life experience. The LD students, including SOS scholars, have both and tutors who are intended to provide the help not provided in the mainstream classes. They work with students with a variety of disabilities as well, so that each student is able to receive the individual help that is most beneficial to them. There is also a third type of classroom called an inclusion classroom, which places LD students in a mainstream classroom setting. These classes have an LD tutor as well as the normal teacher, so that while the teacher teaches as he or she would in a mainstream class, there is also a tutor to provide extra help to students who would like it. This tutor not only helps the LD students, but also the entire class so that students with disabilities may remain anonymous. This anonymity allows LD classified students to be challenged and learn in appropriate level classes, yet with the advantage of the extra help that allows them to succeed. This helps to solve of the strongest issue that arises with learning disabilities, the concept of labeling and pigeonholing. When in LD classes, students are often pigeonholed and therefore cheated of the education they deserve. The

title “learning disability” itself often pigeon holes these students into resource room cases, because they are seen as stupid and or lazy in mainstream classes, often by teachers who do simply do not understand. As our scholars all said, “we are just as smart, probably smarter than the mainstream kids.” In reality, it is these LD students who with a bit of help in weak areas will thrive as the intelligent students they are, and who will grow into motivated and strong adults.

Upon beginning the SOS program with these students, we CMU were not aware of the workings of the school and the different types of classrooms. We were simply told that we would each be paired with an SOS student, an LD student who had been chosen to participate in the Start on Success program. As a class, we discussed the possible reactions of these students to us as an all female Carnegie Mellon class. While many of us were concerned with how to go about working with a disabled student, more were simply nervous to work with students so different than ourselves. We sat in our classroom that first Tuesday the students arrived, eyes darting around the room nervously, awaiting the group of students, curious to see how they would compare to our expectations of inner city kids with learning disabilities. When they arrived we made an initial attempt to break the ice, yet we still were not aware of what truly laid ahead. Our initial reactions to the scholars was that they mostly struck us as your average group of local high school students, involved in a school project. Later that week I found out that Mike would be my scholar, and we were on the road of his journey book, investigating his life as not only a decision maker, but also as a normal kid with a minor disability. As we traveled through his journey book, I discovered that they are not only truly normal high school students, but also highly motivated, strong willed decision makers.

Through the first few sessions as mentors, we found that we began to slowly form reciprocal relationships with the scholars, as they warmed up to us through the sharing of their decision stories. At first, however, we did not feel comfortable addressing specific learning disabilities because the scholars seemed to take offense to any mention of the word “LD.” When we were finally comfortable enough to discuss the scholars’ disabilities, in terms of their specific problems, we truly were able to delve into our investigation. The students constantly said, “we are smarter than those mainstream kids,” and “we don’t have disabilities.” Once I understood this, I realized that these students do not have disabilities in the sense that the word connotes; the scholars take offense to the word “LD” simply because the word to them connotes that they are “dumb.” As Mike began to tell me about his classes more casually, including his problems, I was careful to stay away from the word “disability” in order to keep his trust and respect. Mike explained that in middle school he was in mainstream classes, but upon coming to high school, he was asked to test for the LD program. While in the LD program, he was asked to join the SOS program because it would well fit his needs. This meant that while he attended some LD classes, he also attended mainstream classes, while also gaining the advantage of mentoring and job placement. These experiences not only provide the students with practical life experience, but also teach them to make accommodations for learning disabilities in a real life setting. For Mike, this is important because if taught how to work around his disabilities while in high school, he will be able to achieve his goals of going to college and getting a good job after high school.

During the mentoring process, Mike’s first request of me was that while in our lab sessions I type. To me, this initially seemed like he did not want to type simply because

he was a slow typist, and might have been embarrassed because of his typing skills. As a bad typist myself, I accepted this reasoning, and it did not seem like a disability as much as something he just did not feel comfortable doing. Later in our journey, however, I grew to understand that typing and writing are Mike's disability. By simply asking me to type, however, Mike took agency right off the bat, almost hiding his disability from me. I see this form of accommodation as something that Mike has learned through the combination of his LD and mainstream classes. While he has trouble reading and writing alone for mainstream classes, he is able to write when aided by someone who will simply write down what he says. Mike's way of getting past his disability is truly a matter of personal agency as I see yet, yet as many other students in the class, he failed to recognize it. As high school students, the scholars are required to make many small decisions that may help or hurt them, yet few recognize the magnitude of their own agency on their lives. Just as Mike failed to recognize the importance of his own agency, all the scholars did not seem to think they take any agency at all, while in reality they do.

In terms of agency for LD accommodations, I also discovered the magnitude of the scholars' disabilities, and how they extend to many aspects of their lives. Mike's disability not only manifests itself in typing, a skill which is not common in a classroom setting, but also in reading aloud, speaking in class, and writing essays for classes, all of which are pertinent in school. Many students with learning disabilities have trouble reading aloud in class, in mainstream and LD classes alike. Students say that they feel embarrassed because they may not read a word properly, or are truly afraid of being teased in class. In Mike's case, he attends an LD reading class that helps him practice and feel more comfortable with his reading, so that when he is then in mainstream classes

he can feel less nervous. He also, however, has tactics in order to avoid reading in class. As many students do, he often pretends to not care about the lesson and space out, or fall asleep, so that the teacher will not call on him. In a mainstream class, many LD students such as Mike, who employ these tactics in order to avoid embarrassment, are passed over by the teacher. They are seen as lazy students, and simply do not do well in classes due to a lack of communication with the teacher. This lack of communication is often worsened due to the fact that mainstream classes are larger than LD classes, and teachers may not have the time available to devote to individual attention. In an LD class setting, students such as Mike are able to receive better personal attention, due to smaller class size and teachers better understanding. In this case, even if students do not want to read aloud, they are still helped and encouraged by both teachers and tutors in order to help them advance. In this sense, a major advantage and goal of the inclusion classrooms is that they allow students such as Mike, who have the mental capability, to attend a mainstream class without getting lost due to one weakness they may have.

Outside of inclusion classrooms, in regular mainstream classes, it is often embarrassing for LD students to ask for help. Yet, while they may choose to avoid problems through tactics, many do often make the effort to understand what is unclear in class. It is clear that there is a problem with the teachers within their mainstream classes as well as LD classes. I repeatedly heard stories in which teachers were not open to giving extra help to students in need. Mike told me specifically about his experience in mainstream classes. For a history class he was asked to write an essay one day. Yet, when he went to the teacher to ask for help and understanding of the assignment, she simply handed him a sheet that explained how to write a five-paragraph essay. Left

without a solid explanation, Mike's solution was simply not to write the paper at all. He was clear on the consequences of his actions, yet he was not motivated to write the paper because when made the effort to receive help he was not given any. This is a common situation, in which mainstream teachers may not be willing to help because they do not understand the needs of individual students. Many teachers see the inability to write a paper as laziness, or as the fact that the students do not pay attention in class, and therefore do not want to take their own extra time to explain assignments. These teachers fail to realize the severity of true learning disabilities, and that many students are truly just not able to write an essay without some help, advice, and encouragement.

Aside from the fact that many teachers are not willing to provide extra help, it is often the large size of mainstream classes that hurts students, LD and non LD alike. Because mainstream are much larger than LD classes, oftentimes even if a teacher would like to provide extra help for a student, it is often hard to have time. In this case, many students who do not even have learning disabilities are not able to succeed because they are not able to receive the help they truly need. The SOS students have the advantage of being able to receive additional help and support due to their smaller class sizes, and teachers who are aware of their individual problems. This allows the students to more fully understand what they are taught, not only the areas in which they have problems, but also in general.

A main difference between LD students and mainstream students, aside from the class size and teachers, is that LD students are taught to not be ashamed of their LD's. They are aware that they cannot control their disability, but also that that help is available to them. They greatly benefit from inclusion classrooms because of this self awareness,

that they are both capable and able to receive help as needed. Many students slip through the cracks of mainstream classes because they are not aware that they can receive help. While it appears that many just do not care, it is clear that many students are simply unaware and embarrassed to ask for help. If we see our ultimate question as whether or not these students take agency for themselves, I see the clear answer as yes. They not only go to school as most teens their age do, but they also take the agency to push past stereotypes and discrimination they face as learning disabled teens. Many scholars told me that just as any kids their age, they do not want to go to school, but they go because they have to. This sense of obligation stems from the fact that they are aware that in order to have a good job and make a good salary, one must attend both high school and college. While this may seem like a basic idea, there are many students at Oliver High School who either drop out of high school, or do not attend college. This basic understanding of the importance of education is important to the scholars, and drives them not only to stay in school, but to also work extra hard to push through their learning disabilities. Having a disability, the students have the option of either just “making it by” without the help they really need, or they have the option to take LD classes and get the help they require. The choice to take these classes, and to allow themselves to be classified as learning disabled, shows great agency on the part of these students. Furthermore, all of the students not only work to be in the program, but also acknowledge the fact that they are privileged to be in this program. They see other students around them who slack off, and say, “we’re smarter than them.” These students are aware that they are just as intelligent, if not more intelligent, than their mainstream peers are, and on top of that, they receive help that any student would benefit from.

Upon conducting my inquiry with the students, the question that seemed to rile them up most was when I asked about their workload in LD classes, and the classroom worksheets. They became passionate when answering this question, and were all eager to tell me about their “stupid” worksheets. These worksheets test basic skills in various subjects, and are repeated every week. Often teachers do not teach the work on the sheet, yet the students are expected to understand and repeat them week after week. Students who understand the material then become bored, while students who are confused remain confused. One scholar said, “it’s real cheap work, I want them to teach me something.” These students want to learn, and want to cover as much material as mainstream students do. Many however, cannot hold their own in a mainstream class because they become overwhelmed. Yet, they are held back in LD classes, and are made to feel dumb. When students in the LD classes have mastered the worksheets that they think are so dumb, because they understand them, there are often students remaining who do not understand the material. The scholars said, however, that they are often not allowed to help each other with the sheets. Teachers interpret any type of talking in class as misconduct, whether the students are helping each other or not. Therefore, students who would otherwise be able to help their peers, and raise the overall level of the class, are not allowed to do so.

Ultimately, it is pigeonholing that often holds LD students back. They are given what they see as “cheap work” because teachers feel that they are not capable of more. The scholars complain about constantly having teachers “hold their hands,” when all they want is independence. There is a stigma in this country that students with learning disabilities cannot be smart, and they are thus seen as stupid and incapable of achieving

goals. The SOS program provides these students with an opportunity to overcome this stigma, break through the pigeonholing, and prove themselves as capable and independent young adults.

Pigeonholing causes the students to be held back from appropriate level work, so that they become bored in class. When bored with repetitive material, the students look to seek alternatives to sitting in a boring classroom. The students who understand the worksheets and become bored in class often resort to skipping school, due to the lack of challenge. The cycle of pigeonholing, and laziness is then perpetuated because students who skip school too often may fail out. They are therefore seen as failures, whereas in reality it shows a failure on the part of the education system. For Mike, his own agency to do well in school is often not sufficient to overcome the difficulties he encounters mainstream and LD classes due to pigeonholing and a lack of the correct amount of aid. He is a fully capable student, and with a bit of help in his weak areas, is able to flourish. Yet, finding help is often not easy because in mainstream classes he is left behind, while in LD classes the extreme aid is seen as extraneous and condescending. Pigeonholing hurts these students across the board, because it affects them in all classes, due to the extremes of each.

In general, all the scholars seemed to agree that they feel they are treated like kindergartners in LD classes, and would like to advance further in their learning. They are held back by worksheets, and teachers who may not recognize what the students are truly capable of. The scholars stated that mainstream classes move more quickly than LD classes, yet the LD classes do not seem to progress much at all. While they are ready for the same content as mainstream classes, they are held back by the belief that they are not

capable of understanding the same content. When discussing LD classes, Mike said, “I already knew all those words they were teaching us,” words such as “the,” in his reading class. It is insulting for a student high school to be accused of not knowing how to read such simple words. The purpose of the class should be to catch the students up to mainstream classes. In Mike’s case especially, he would like to brush up on his reading, his weak area, in order to help him in other mainstream classes. Yet, the basic reading he is taught does not help him in other classes.

In this case, inclusion classes are the perfect solution because students with minor disabilities are able to feel that they are learning and being respected as normal students, yet they are still able to receive extra help as needed. As Mike said, sometimes the problem with LD classes is that they get too much help, which also makes them feel that they are treated like children. Mike’s solution to this problem is to make an effort to switch into mainstream classes, yet the students cannot switch in the middle of a semester because they would be too far behind. While the LD classes teach the students the material in a slow, solid manner, it does not allow them to advance to the extent many are capable of. For many students, it is being caught between two extremes that makes education difficult, something that inclusion classes can help to overcome.

For all of these reasons, and problems with LD classes, Mike says that he would like to be in more mainstream classes. Many of the scholars said this as well, because they want to be challenged and treated as the young adults that they are. They all say “we are normal kids, we’re not ‘special.’” To the scholars, the word special connotes that they are stupid or slow, which they clearly are not. They simply require a little extra help to overcome their areas of weakness due to a biological problem, something that they are

not able to control. They are normal kids with specific problems in certain areas of learning and understanding, and through accommodations and aid they are fully capable. For this reason, Mike benefits from LD classes because they help him work out his disability so that he can also be in mainstream classes and succeed.

Through this mentoring process, I feel that I haven't gained not only an understanding of the problems teens with learning disabilities face, but a true first-hand experience with them. It was my actual interaction with Mike, and progression within our relationship, that gave me insight into the workings of his disability as well as the "inside scoop" from the voice of a student. Through writing his journey book entry and vignettes, I could see the gears moving in his head, his frustration with not being able to write his thoughts, and the real underpinnings of his frustration in school. When I coaxed and prompted him with ideas for starting his story, Mike took it and ran, giving me more stories more quickly than I was able to write them down. Soon enough, Mike had composed a full story, full of his own thoughts and wording. It is this delay, however, that many teachers and parents view as laziness, and are quick to pigeonhole a student. This is a common misconception among LD students because often times they are not able to write or verbalize what is asked of them, or even the problem.

With these scholars, and the stories I hear from their experiences, I see the stigma that LD students are too slow to learn or advance in work come to life. It is credit to these students' own agency that they do push to live up to their full potential, and attend mainstream classes in which they can be challenged. They all aim to live up to their own potential, and are aware that they are capable of doing so. What they all truly want, as young adults and decision makers, is a combination of help and independence, which they are

able to receive in inclusion classes. These students are all searching for a way to prove themselves, as strong individuals, and I see our mentoring process as a way of doing so. By providing the students the opportunity to teach a class of CMU students about their own situations and disabilities, the scholars have been given the chance to not only prove their intelligence, but to also give credit to what they must battle. I am astonished by the way the students help each other, look out for one another, and truly do care about their own educations. The resource rooms are a good way to help them begin, but it is clear that many of these students need to be given the opportunity to have a challenge in order to prove the stigmas about learning disabilities to be wrong.

Laura Conrad
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