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Expanding the Educational Enclave: A New Teacher Starting with Inclusion

By

Catherine Wilder

Presented to the Graduate Faculty
of Claremont Graduate University in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts in Education,
specializing in Extensive Support Needs.

We certify that we have read this document
and approve it as adequate in scope and
quality for the degree of Master of Arts.

Faculty Advisor, Dr. Samara Suafo'a
Claremont Graduate University
Clinical Assistant Professor of Education
Assistant Director of Department of Teacher Education

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Abstract

An enclave is a group of individuals who are somehow extraordinary and divided from the whole. By this logic, a special education classroom segregated from the general population is an educational enclave. Modern research has been moving toward inclusive practices making these enclaves less isolated. This ethnographic account is of a first year education specialist entering critical skills teaching without prior experience or knowledge of the moderate to severe field. Being introduced to this particular field in the midst of a pandemic this new teacher attempted several inclusion practices previously untouched at the particular school and district. Over the course of one school year, the teacher collected data on three focus students and their varying degrees of inclusion with general education peers. This ethnography is an honest reflection of failures and successes from one individual whose naivety mirrored our usual standards of ability and intelligence as measured by common American society.

Key terms: inclusion, Extensive Support Needs, Critical Social Justice Educator (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), dis/abilities (DisCrit, 2016), Emergent Bilingual (García, 2009), ethnography (Fetterman, 2009)

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To my first students, thank you for your patience
while I opened my eyes.

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Introduction

A staggering number of educators have left the profession during the COVID-19 pandemic; within two years 600,000 individuals departed from their classrooms before their planned retirement (Walker, 2022). While this unprecedented fallout has been occurring in our education system there are handfuls of new teachers nationwide that are rising to the challenge.

This ethnography is an account of what myself as a first year special education teacher underwent joining the profession during this extraordinary time. It is a piece of literature enhanced by my own drawings from the course of the year. The ethnography connects the efforts between myself, students of my Extensive Support Needs (ESN) classroom, their general education peers, and paraprofessionals. It also recognizes collaboration endeavors with fellow elementary school staff and my colleagues in the Claremont Graduate University Teacher Education Program (CGU TEP).

When asked most veteran teachers can hardly recall their first whirlwind years in the classroom. Being a first year teacher, there were low expectations for what I would accomplish. The guidance of CGU TEP countered that narrative, they believed that through equitable teaching, socio-emotional learning (SEL) methods like circle (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015), and problematizing hidden curriculum, even a first year teacher could create an equitable classroom ecology of rigor and love. We were given tools such as the Critical Social Justice (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) Competencies (see Appendix A) and went into our classrooms hopeful for change. By entering the field with the perspective of a Critical Social Justice (CSJ) Educator (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) I found certain inclusive practices easy to introduce to my classroom which lacked the routines found in more developed classrooms.

Upon hearing the details of my new profession, I'm often asked:

How did you get into *that*?

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That being special education. Had I chosen Biology it would be assumed I enjoy science; or a general elementary school teacher, assumed I love kids. But people need a stronger motive to understand the leap into special education.

Is there someone in your family that requires services?

No.

Did you encounter someone with disabilities who set you on this path?

No.

It was an unromantic start, mere suggestions from friends in the field who saw my qualities and recommended the career. There was also the convenient location of CGU TEP near my hometown, where the rigorous program would allow me to work as a paid intern teacher during classes, bringing my income and tuition to a wash.

I always thought of myself as a good person, a patient person. I enjoy learning foreign languages and tackling logic puzzles. My perpetual hobbies like cooking or art could last my lifetime. Considering these assets in temperament and determination, I see with more clarity what my colleagues also recognized in me: my students' growth would require this same continuous determination and passion.

Even so, I had no idea what I was getting into.

I had thought by dedicating my artistic and linguistic talents to these students that I was noble in my pursuit, now while I reflect on the diversity in my classroom I was not prepared to offer these talents in an equitable way. Before being introduced to a field-of-two teaching method, my student Jacob (all names changed for anonymity) with cerebral palsy could not participate in my planned art projects. The conversational Spanish I worked hard to learn was not utilized in my classroom until the second half of the year, finally bridging the divide between myself and several of my students who are Emergent Bilinguals (García, 2009). Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) became the bane of my existence. I needed to read each student's data, interpret that data and continue progress for each of their five to ten goals. As the teacher

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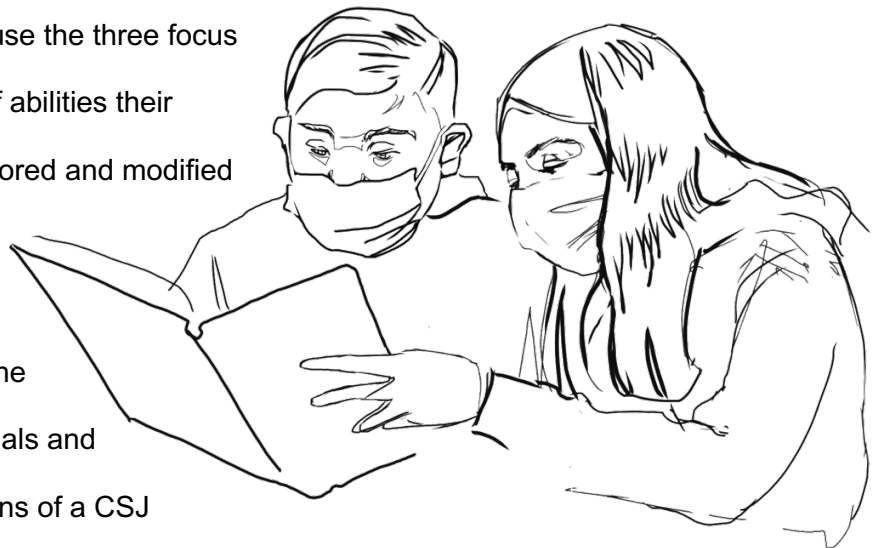
of record I was expected to plan the required IEP meetings with all necessary attendees within their legal timeframes.

This ethnography is divided into three parts: the Story of Self focuses on Things Mistaken, it is a connection between my own family background and how our history strengthened and hindered my biases and thoughts throughout the school year. I repeatedly discovered my own misperceptions of individuals with disabilities, purposefully the first of our CSJ Competencies demands that we grow self-awareness (see Appendix A). By reading my errors, I hope this small audience can acknowledge and remedy similar beliefs too.

Following the reflection of my own background and these perceived shortfalls, part two the Story of Students, Households and Community will discuss what happened within our classroom walls. It is a collection of research about the three focus students who were the core of my study this past year. Their unique abilities challenged and strengthened my role as Critical Social Justice (CSJ) Educator (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). The Story of Students, Households and Community documents portions of these students' growth as adolescents, scholars, and citizens. I will delve into each student's academic progress and my experiences connecting with each of their households.

Most importantly Where Things Went Right will discuss the various ways inclusion played a role in our community. Because the three focus students are on very wide spectrum of abilities their methods of inclusion needed to be tailored and modified to their unique assets and needs.

As mentioned earlier inclusion was a core of my attention when beginning the school year and it took many forms, trials and errors. By entering the field with the lens of a CSJ



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Educator (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) I found certain inclusive practices easier to introduce in a new classroom which lacked the routines found in developed classrooms.

It's a large focus of mine to explore inclusion practices as we continue moving education forward with a progressive attitude. A lot of special education has been limited by the expectations of our culture and that permeates through decision making by our leaders. I had the pleasure of taking my students on the single field trip offering this year. In previous years they would not participate although they were always invited. That was the decision of the previous teacher, who my paraprofessionals informed me, thought a field trip was overwhelming. I found the opportunity exciting, not only did my students participate in all activities at the adobe mission, but general education peers included and were mindful of them.

The third and final part of this ethnography is the Conclusion. This is dedicated to our current role when advocating for students and individuals with disabilities. Multiple opportunities presented themselves during the course of this year and half where I was challenged to champion on my students' behalf; at times with success and other times not. By sharing these experiences I hope to spread awareness and extend my observations to you as a reader so that together we can clean the scope in which people view individuals with disabilities and the community surrounding them.

In conclusion, this ethnography will share one first year teacher's lived experience growing as an Education Specialist and human. Hopefully my ongoing growth as an advocate and educator of students with special needs can offer you support and ideas as a reader. Just as my students opened my eyes to the joys and challenges of being an individual with moderate-severe disabilities, I hope to offer you a window as well.

Story of Self

Things Mistaken

“Quand le doigt montre le ciel, l’imbecile regarde le doigt.”

“When a finger is pointing up to the sky, the fool looks at the finger.”

Jean-Pierre Jeunet (2001)

The community I found myself teaching in this first year has a population of 17.6% living below the poverty line. Of the individuals in the community, 71.4% were identified as Hispanic or Latino according to the United States Census Bureau (2021). At my elementary school in particular, our minoritized enrollment is 97%, with 87.6% representing Hispanic or Latino (U.S. News and World Report, 2022). While taking in this information, I recognized my family’s background should have connected me with this local population, but there was a great divide.

In the 1940’s my first generation grandparents quickly assimilated to survive Los Angeles, where only the previous decade Mexican Americans were being deported by the United States’ government as a response to the Great Depression. Rather than subject themselves to racial violence, my grandparents all but lost their way of life, refusing to speak their native language or pass what seemed various cultural burdens onto their kin.

While some adaptations of their childhood cuisine continued to appear during Catholic celebrations, I found my identity far from my roots in Mexico. It wasn’t until college I realized my heritage and where it positioned me within a global perspective. My roommate was an exchange student from Mexico who didn’t realize I had any family connections to the country. She went on a heated rampage explaining how Mexican Americans, especially those unable to speak Spanish, were frauds and imbeciles, taking claim to a culture they knew little or nothing about. I met all these criteria and out of fear didn’t reveal my background to my roommate. This conversation, while I remember being uncomfortable at the time, did ignite my own research into my heritage and the language we once carried.

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Similar to the Mexican heritage I was displaced from, I discovered the world of special needs was equally disconnected from my daily lifestyle. Culture, however, is an ongoing development, it is a conglomeration of taught traditions and conditions that do not fall from the sky (Love, 2019, p.128). It became obvious starting in the special education field I had implicit biases that were long unrecognized. I found myself repeatedly ashamed of my thoughts and actions being present in my special day classroom. These misconstructions had not been given prior opportunities to present themselves in the culture I surrounded myself with before.

Oh my gosh, she's so cute.

My paraprofessional, Eileen, was talking about our student Mia, but I could only recognize her disfigurement due to Down syndrome.

He is so smart!

By testing cognitively at eight months old, although nine years old, I was not convinced Ismael could be smart. Limited by my standard perceptions of beauty and intelligence, I found them all wanting. These shortfalls of judgment should have come as little surprise. To reiterate, I

was raised in a family who had no experience in the world and culture of individuals with disabilities. There was a great divide between the pedestal our family placed itself and the unlucky world of those with special needs.

During the summer prior to the school year, I was focused on creating classroom procedures I could carry throughout my entire career (I didn't realize the humor in this goal at this time) I started to build staples in our environment like a cute feelings chart and a fancy calendar we could complete daily, I was making these staples before considering my students cognitive or physical capabilities. So while attempting to create an accessible environment, I did not have an accessible attitude (Gamble, 2016, 08:02). Both the feelings chart and calendar required multiple adjustments



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throughout the year to better meet my students where they were (CSJ Competency, 5.2, see Appendix A). And already the career staples for my classroom were changing.

I entered my classroom with a narrow image of our learning expectations. Before the year started I was analyzing each student's individual struggles while simultaneously unpacking their multiple IEP goals. By attempting to tackle these nuanced details in paperwork, my self perception was waning. I would need to be an extraordinarily organized teacher who could uniquely reach each and every individual at a rigorous level. I would need to show them social skills, become a loving maternal role model, be a responsible friend, a financial advisor and a fair playmate, all while accessing our curriculum. In the words of Mark Maron (2016), "the narrower and rarer the identity you choose for yourself, the more everything will seem to threaten you" (p.140).

These multiple identities meant I was not performing naturally in the classroom. As a first year teacher, I could recognize it was not sustainable. My ability to discipline my students was lacking, I assumed they required a softer approach when addressing unwanted behaviors than a neurotypical student. I had been sheltering my students from pursuing higher academics, always assuming certain concepts or study techniques were too advanced for their level. I doubted their willingness to learn, and regularly relied on play to hurdle our academic activities. My perceptions of normalcy were often realized by my households, who saw the work their student was producing and believed it too low a level of rigor. For example, Raiden's aunt told me he knew his numbers, while I had yet to see any one-to-one correspondence in the classroom. The decisions I was making that coddled my students came from a culture deeply embedded in me, and being nearly invisible, this can be the hardest culture to identify (Hammond, 2015). Overall, they did not require the level of catering I was smothering them with.

My definitions for beauty and intelligence were in desperate need of being reshaped and my lack of experience was leading to a lack of comprehension regarding what my students needed (Zarillo, 2017, p.69). While building this understanding, a lot of my comprehension is

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credited to my student Jacob. His previous teacher had cautioned me not to be fooled by his physical state due to cerebral palsy. His diagnosis is severe and he is expected to be limited to his wheelchair for his lifetime. He is not yet fully verbal, meaning he is limited to specific sounds and single syllable words. Nevertheless, he is more cognitively aware than I first credited.

In the first week of school, Jacob would hang his head low and I, being concerned, would lift it back up, situating his skull between the butterfly wings of his chair. This clever game continued until Eileen, a paraprofessional who had years of experience with him, told me to stop. Jacob confirmed their suspicions and laughed excitedly while lifting his head to see my reaction. As for Ismael and Mia, my perception of them spun as we built stronger bonds. Often it was my worst moments teaching, reflections of deep shame that changed my perspective. Only at the tail end of these dark moments was I aware enough to question why my values were failing me (Maron, 2016, p.154).

By separating each student and dividing their images into granular IEP progress, I was failing to see the classroom as a whole functioning organism. I failed to see them as solely students, and myself as solely their teacher. I had unclear expectations of myself as a teacher and the role I wanted to play, as mentioned earlier, I was maintaining different identities and exhausting myself in the classroom. Approaching my second year of teaching I can now better identify the parts of my classroom that should be constant and truly staples. With that consistency, there is a level of adaptation my students will be required to learn. For instance, students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) need to understand aspects of society will not always cater to them. There will not always be a reward for good behavior or the possibility of play to be coaxed through an activity.

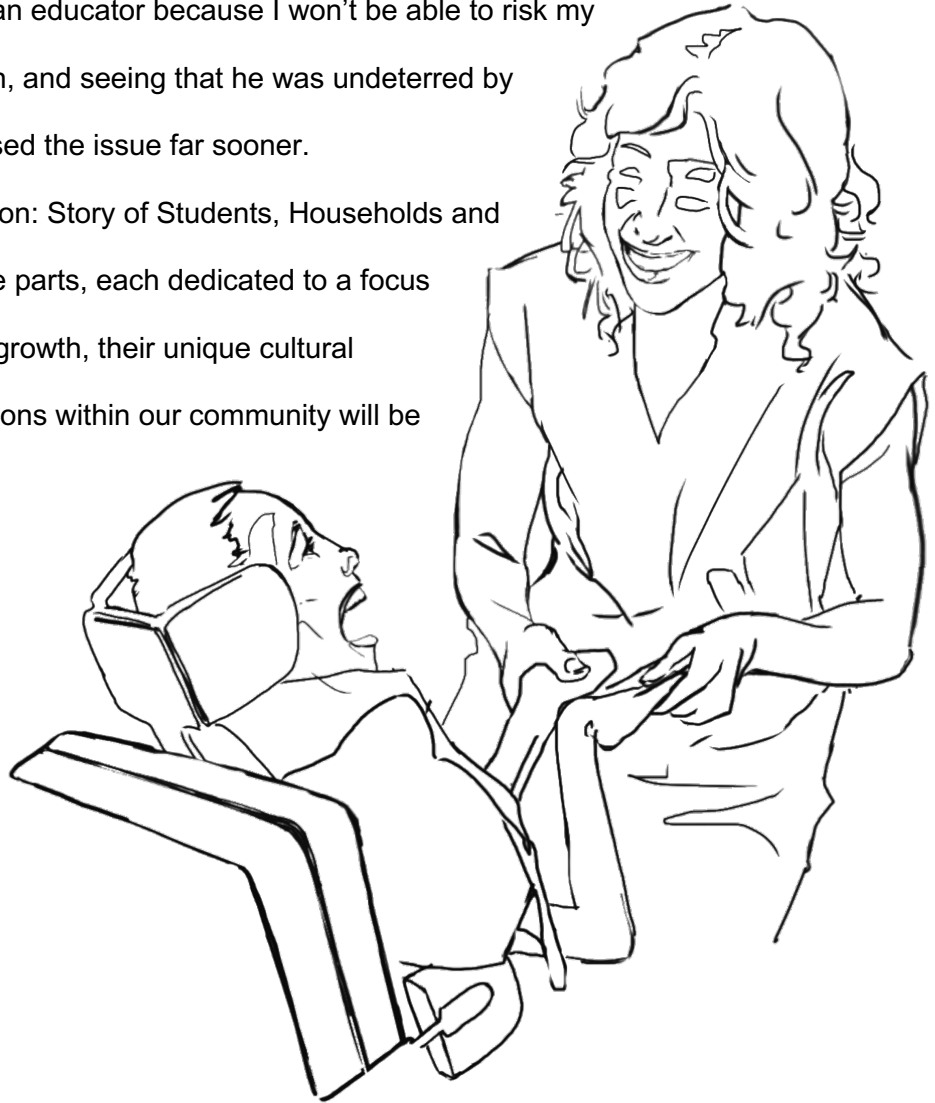
One student, Raiden, created a habit of moving my chair when I was not looking. He had silly intentions and would giggle every time. Between his laughter and general lack of secrecy, I would always be aware of this movement and correct the chair before sitting. I had not reprimanded him throughout the year and hoped my lack of humor would be enough to deter

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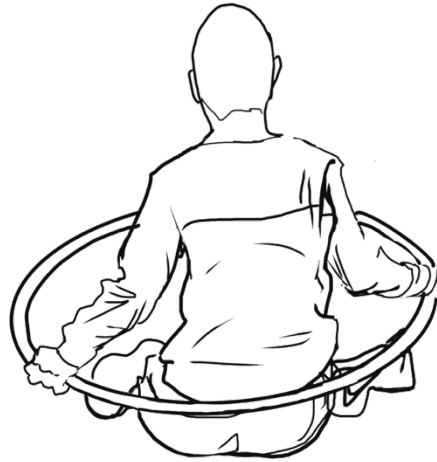
him. Near the end of school year, as I stood up for a stapler and saw my chair once again roll away in my peripheral, I decided to take the fall. It was overly dramatic and while I was unhurt, Raiden was clearly distraught. While I quietly regained my seat, he apologized again and again.

It is repercussions like these my students need to understand to better grow into the respectful individuals that we all hope our children can grow to be. Simultaneously, I still have room for development as an educator because I won't be able to risk my body to teach every lesson, and seeing that he was undeterred by the lack of humor, addressed the issue far sooner.

In the coming section: Story of Students, Households and Community there are three parts, each dedicated to a focus student, whose individual growth, their unique cultural backgrounds and connections within our community will be explored.



Story of Students, Households and Community



Finding Space

“When find beauty in a certain place we didn’t get before.

And this is why everything is new.”

-Pablo Casals (Foley, 1955)

Ismael came to my class a month into the school year, his paperwork was riddled with behavioral problems. His records referenced multiple incidents involving peers and adults that pertained to hitting, screaming, throwing items, pulling objects from others including eye glasses, and eloping from the group or room. He was also documented executing self injurious behaviors such as head banging against items or walls. Being unfamiliar with these behaviors outside of textbooks, my anxiety grew with every IEP page.

The first time I met Ismael his father was apologizing to a group of general education girls at the front of the school. Transportation services would take a minimum of two weeks to organize his pick up and drop off (after those two weeks pandemic protocols would fluctuate whether Ismael could board the bus without a face mask). I learned he had been hitting the peer girls as they passed. While his dad and I introduced ourselves, Ismael slapped my stomach, his dad copiously asked for forgiveness on his behalf. CGU TEP warned me of students like Ismael, whose paperwork can deter from the individual. Being transferred from out of the district, I was

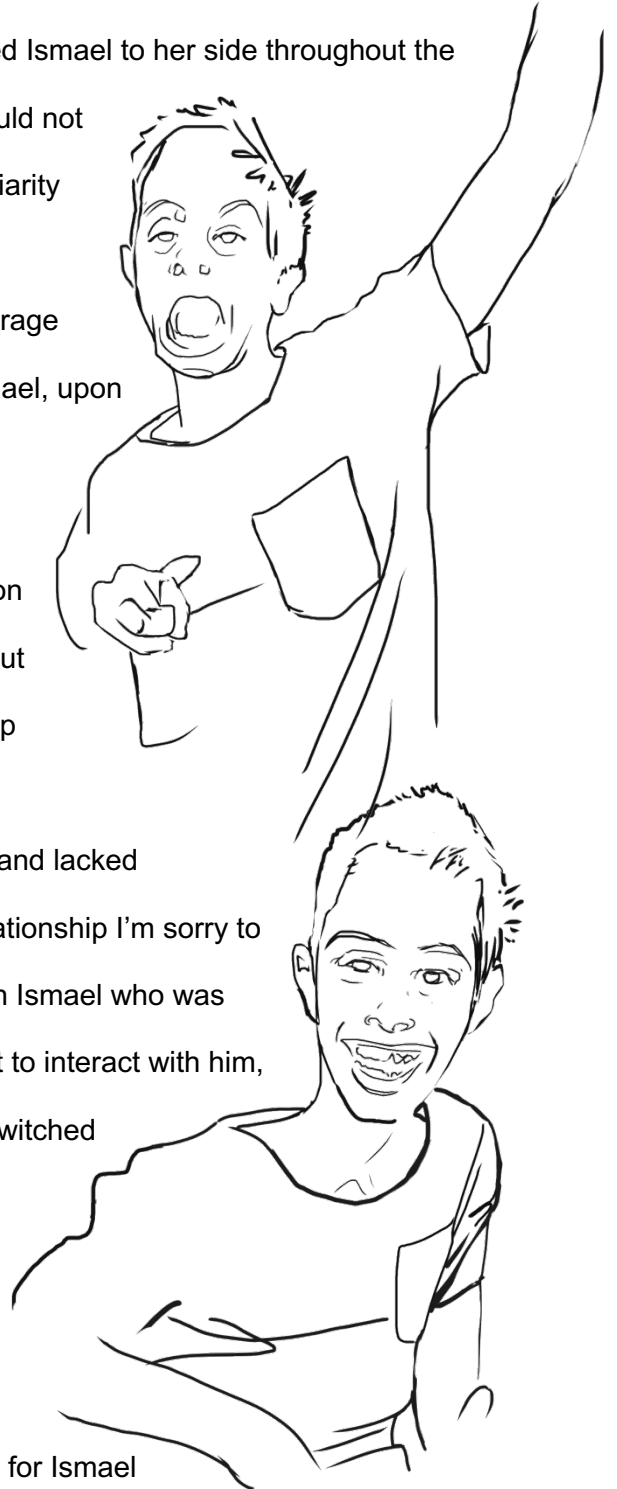
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given his IEP before this first meeting, and my misperceptions of Ismael were becoming more solidified in person.

As a first year teacher I found myself taking shade in my paraprofessional's lead. Paula had experience in managing unwanted behaviors and glued Ismael to her side throughout the school day. Being limited to his seat beside her, Ismael could not hit his peers, his eloping behaviors waned as he built familiarity with the expectation of staying seated for instruction.

These behavior advancements would become a mirage when music came on. Music was highly stimulating for Ismael, upon hearing various tunes he would be sent into a frenzy of running, jumping, dancing and hitting others. Paula had various methods for retrieving Ismael. She expertly relied on her stern voice to negate his more dangerous behaviors, but overall Ismael wanted to please her. While their relationship began to prosper, his and mine continued to recede.

I had trepidations about welcoming him to my side and lacked confidence in my behavior solutions. This phase of our relationship I'm sorry to say went on for weeks. I needed to build a relationship with Ismael who was becoming more isolated by the day. His peers did not want to interact with him, often out of confusion and fear of his actions. His routine switched between being fixated to Paula's side and opportunities to practice interacting with others during the day, which would end unsuccessfully with hitting or throwing. At lunch Ismael attempted to push over every trash bin he crossed; week one he was six for six all five days. I longed for Ismael



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to enjoy our whole group dance period in the afternoon but his excitement continued to prevent his participation.

In terms of CSJ Competencies (see Appendix A) I found my focus with Ismael in Domain Four or Socio-Emotional Learning, where teachers will maintain expectations and anticipate to limit unproductive behavior. But these efforts to connect with were fruitless. At this time, there was no established communication with Ismael. He was not responding to single English requests, and while vocal, was not producing recognizable sounds.

There are specific terms for inclusion in our current special education community, *pull out* meaning the student is supported by a paraprofessional in a general education environment for a subject they excel in. *Push in* signifying when the provider attends the classroom to offer educational services. Aspiring CSJ Educators (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) hope every student will partake in these opportunities outside the usual lunch and recess overlap. But there is a level of collaboration required by several parties: the special education teacher, the general education teacher, administration, and not to be forgotten: the students.

Students like Ismael are further ostracized than their peers in the general education setting. Not only because of his unusual behaviors and sounds but also his unusual appearance. It was in the first couple days of taking Ismael to the general education playground that a student, pointing in his direction, blatantly screamed: What is that?!

Pearson (2015) reminds us that school is a place meant for building interactions. With disfigurement so widely underrepresented, as well as uncommon behaviors, it's important to build opportunities to increase visibility of all students. Pearson (2015) reminds us that through education we can increase public familiarity with disabilities and lessen the fear that stems from prejudices. By utilizing inclusive practices, Ismael would benefit from more opportunities to build and reaffirm his positive behaviors.

Ismael's actions and student reactions to him, made me reflect of the analysis by Broderick and Leonardo (2016) where smartness is a quality often perceived outside ourselves,

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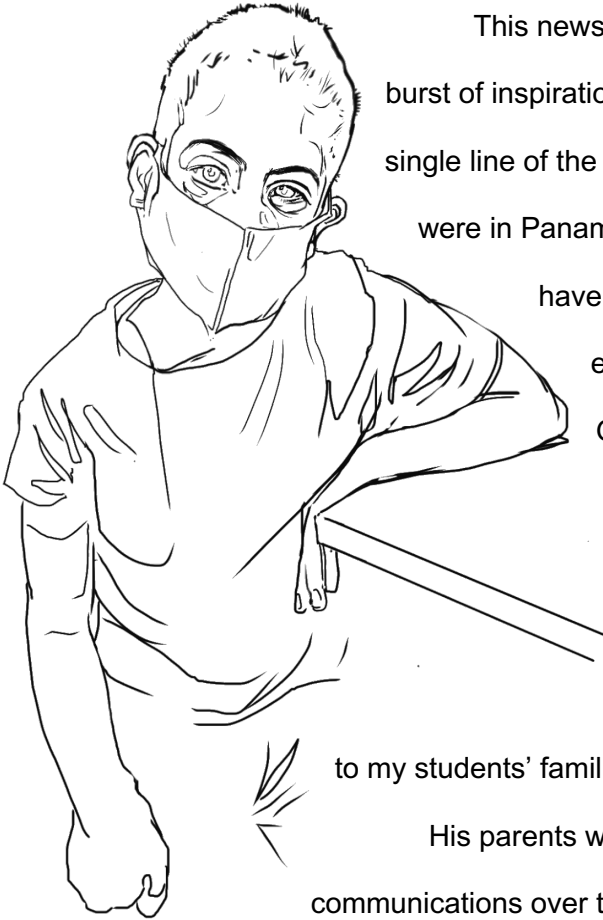
whereas goodness is inherently inside us (p.58). After witnessing a student with higher cognizance yell harmful jokes, Ismael also symbolized a valid debate about the perception of good. He again had again been a victim of society's perceptions. While he did hit and throw, I had trouble viewing Ismael as a bad kid because he was lacking a form of communication. The student who chose his words to yell, however, could benefit from being redirected toward good actions.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, face masks were required on all district buses. Ismael was a student who detested anything on his face, which due to protocol would hinder his access to transportation. In the couple weeks transportation services were organizing we worked hard to teach Ismael about wearing a face mask. He responded best to Paula's modeling and attempts to put a mask on him. At this time, Ismael did not communicate with us outside of gesturing, he could not form words and did not respond to single word requests. The Speech Language Pathologist (SLP) thought we should introduce him to a communication board, 4x7 visual squares of key words and choices. We wanted to build his familiarity with the simple commands such as no, stop or go. We taped them down on every desk he used, including in the cafeteria. Using a similar graphic style, I developed simple two-square communication boards involving face masks worn on and off and a representation for no hitting followed by say sorry.

Involving visual communication began to shift the relationship between Ismael and I. He was an excellent learner with technology and adapted to touchscreens very quickly. The stagnant nature of the visual communication boards, while boring to him, were relatable and effective. Through consistently using them we began to make headway with toilet training and building Ismael's awareness of wanted and unwanted behaviors.

One night Ismael's dad texted me a picture for cause of celebration: it was Ismael wearing a face mask, the message clarified that he retrieved and placed it on his own.

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This news from Ismael's dad was a big win, it gave me another burst of inspiration and I returned to his IEP for a closer look. In a single line of the psychiatric report I learned four of Ismael's nine years were in Panama, meaning most of Ismael's communicative years have been in a Spanish speaking country. His family, who ethnically identified as Asian Indian, were speaking Gujarati at home as well. Ismael was an Emerging Trilingual (García, 2009) with English being the least practiced. Fortunately, I have been practicing Spanish for several years in hopes of reconnecting with my family, little did I know this passion would connect me to my students' families as well.

His parents was very kind to welcome my attempts, and our communications over text for the remainder of the year would fluctuate

between English and Spanish. Regardless, I was determined to test the boundaries of Ismael's English knowledge; he had adapted quickly to the communication boards and was accessing more positive behaviors daily, such as waiting in line and keeping his hands to himself or throwing away his food after mealtime, independently.

My professor and I reflected on his funds of knowledge, tapping into Domain Five of our CSJ Competencies (see Appendix A), where as educators we hope to identify and meet students where they are, then we can support them with culturally sustaining practices. She advised me to sandwich Spanish into my conversation with Ismael, meaning to initially attempt a command in English and gauge if he responds, if not to then support him with that term in Spanish and lastly again in English to reaffirm the vocabulary (Gonzalez, personal communication, 2021). Ismael was learning fast and his progress seemed to snowball. With his communication and interactions blooming, his aggressive behaviors declined; because he was

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throwing manipulatives less, we started to make headway with errorless puzzles and phonics. The success with his face mask and his leaps in language development redirected my focus to his lack of preferred music time, in which he still was unsuccessful in joining and always ended up latched to Paula.

Our class was given a trampoline from another special education teacher on campus. Large enough for one student at a time, it was a fun movement break and great for their motor skill development. While Mia would jackrabbit on the mat for minutes at a time, I observed how Ismael enjoyed curling up in the center instead. He would sit cross legged and folded over in the small circle, a practicing contortionist.

One day, before launching our regular dance videos, I retrieved two hula hoops for Ismael and I. We stood in our two circles near the whole group and in front of the video screen. Ismael attempted to leave his hoop immediately, chasing a peer, but I redirected him saying no in a calm voice and leading him back inside. After I modeled dancing in my own hoop, he was understanding. We danced through two songs simultaneously with five corrections, meaning I returned Ismael to his hoop, on the first day. By the week's end, Ismael was gesturing for a hula hoop to initiate music time.

I was excited for the breakthrough, I passed the hula hoop idea to the Physical Education Teacher, she took my class outside for an hour twice weekly, and was also concerned for Ismael's lack of participation. She was extraordinarily patient with my students, and having strong communication between us, we were open to feedback. The next PE class I observed Ismael was stretching inside his hula hoop alongside the rest of the class.

It was obvious the community on campus could benefit from learning to work or dance with an individual as unique as Ismael. Testing around eight months cognitively, I could not imagine a successful pull out inclusion plan during this first year for Ismael. In order to connect him with his peers I would need to pull *them* in.

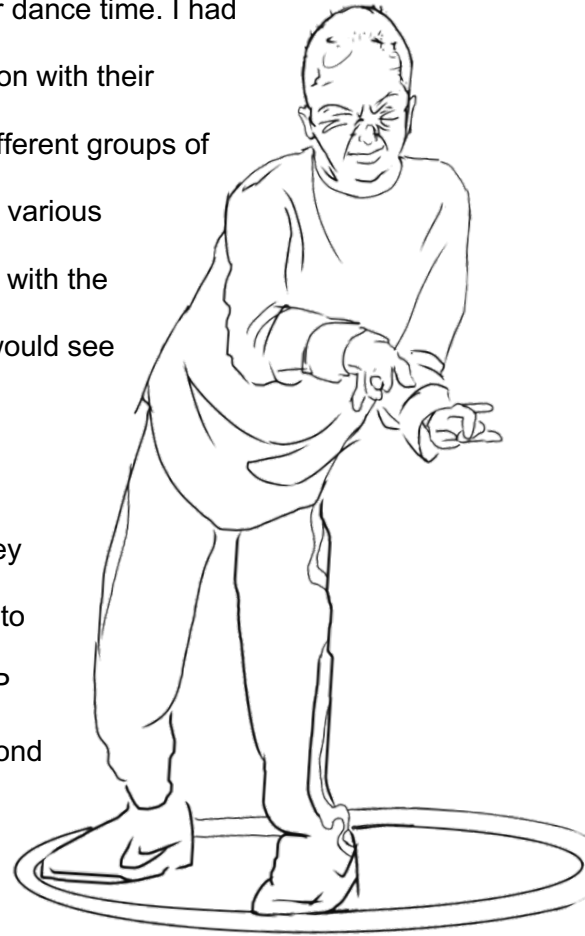
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I invited groups of general education students in during our dance time. I had previously built a rapport with these students through my connection with their teachers. The dance time was unchanging in the afternoon and different groups of general education students began rotating in and out, learning the various moves my students were practicing. Ismael would remain dancing with the group in his hula hoop and if he wanted to move elsewhere, you would see him bend down, pick up his hoop and walk within his circle.

Moving Through Systems

Crane and his family moved from Mississippi last year. They were moving frequently between apartments and he transferred into my classroom two months into the school year. I was given his IEP and cumulative file prior, his four goals in academics were far beyond my other students. For instance, Raiden and Mia were developing their familiarity with the full alphabet while Crane was progressing to grammatically correct sentences. I would test Jacob's awareness of numbers using a field-of-two, but Crane's was moving towards double digit multiplication.

The first time we met, it was a surprise for Crane as much as us. He was very wary of the class he had been transferred in, and appeared aware it was not the correct placement. He did not want to be seen with my students the first few weeks, I noted his fast pace walking and observed him ignore a peer saying hi during recess. Crane stayed away from Jacob by choice and his inordinate size deterred Ismael from hitting him. I quickly learned Crane was highly competitive. He often skipped over another student's turn which left Mia, Raiden and Sophie behind in the lesson. If they were not frustrated or bored, Crane conversely would become so with the slow progress.



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Crane was diagnosed with Intellectual Disability (ID) during his childhood in Mississippi, however being African American, this is not a legal disability status for him in California. By migrating through our education system Crane's diagnosis and his paperwork was interpreted by my district as justification for his placement in my educational enclave. Upon meeting him I knew along with my colleagues, he would be successful in a less restrictive environment (LRE). This is a critical failure of the special education system. By having a lack of consistency nationwide with diagnoses and legalities, discrepancies such as this must be expected and addressed.

Moving through our nationwide system, there was a failure of communicating Crane's rights, and when moving through our statewide system, more failures in organization. With his previous district being outside our Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA), all his paperwork needed to be transcribed into our data system. The previous district had yet to accomplish his change of placement, assessment plan or eligibility evaluation so a lot of his paperwork, like progress reports, were unfinished or lost. Again my attention was directed to the error of putting paperwork before the student. The final and most detrimental failure with this LRE placement occurred at our individual district level. It's unnerving to consider how many peoples' desks this student's cumulative file passed over and of those many professionals, how few actually met Crane.

Due to our system's previous lack of interest in his education Crane was now behind academically by several years, but he was showing interest in his own education and learning new concepts. We would need to continue advancing his reading to validate the transfer of placement and successfully migrate him into an appropriate environment. He began the year reading at a kindergarten level, which at fourth grade also constituted him for my M/S classroom. Evidently, he had not received prior supports to build his reading abilities because he was showing fast development receiving just fifteen additional minutes of reading time with me daily. Again, it was hard to justify his low reading for a placement in an ESN classroom.

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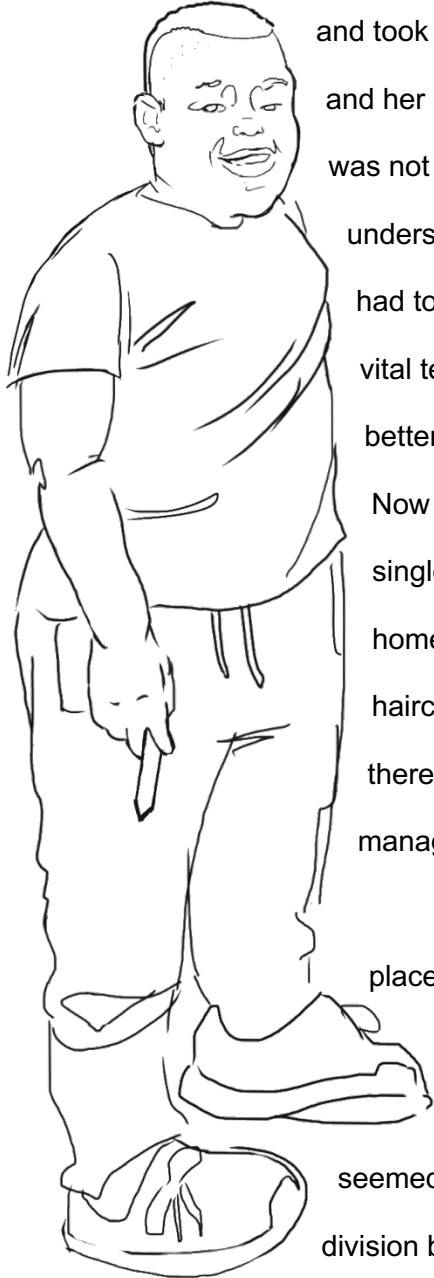
I brought the subject to his mom's attention immediately. She needed to be aware we would be taking steps, like forming an assessment plan, to move Crane into a LRE. She was curious of what the educational jargon was implying, worried that he would no longer receive special education services, and explaining she already had conversations with Crane about his classroom peers. She had assured him that students with moderate-severe disabilities are just like us and she revealed to me she had the same experience of being placed in a similar class during her childhood. His mom would have also benefited from a less restrictive environment, but without the error ever being corrected, it appeared she developed a strong affinity for empathy and less so for academic achievement or her educational rights.

The pattern of this African American family being recommended for special education services makes me question the validity of the process. Smartness and goodness has long been a central facet in our belief system and if we trace that history we would find its roots entwined with whiteness and ableism. Looking at examples in the media and our community we can see a pattern of who is deemed intelligent and good, and it has been long uncriticized (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016, p.55). Both Crane and his mom were judged to be placed in a restrictive classroom and I am confident other steps may have been taken should they have been White.

This is a deeply structural problem. The reality of an educational gap between ethnicities has become disparagingly more clear. We need to better educate our household on their student's rights and capabilities in order to lift each individual. Gillborn and his colleagues took a particular interest in the intersection between race and dis/ability, one of their studies looked at 62 Black families' relationship with their school community. Only one household reported a positive experience of trusting the school and the guidance they provided. Black families of a higher economic advantage often reported looking for support outside the school system. These multiple examples offer the clarity to see dis/ability continues to "operate as a racialized barrier to equity in... schools" (Connor, D. J. et al, 2007; Gillborn et al. 2016, p. 52).

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Crane was the second oldest in his family, and when I first saw them after school I had trouble counting the number of siblings he had. His oldest brother, a sixth grader on campus, walked wordlessly up and took the stroller from his mom. Crane found her in a similar fashion



and took two younger siblings by the hand, Mom cradled a phone to one ear and her baby in the other arm, off they walked to the bus stop together. Mom was not pressed to move Crane into another classroom and I couldn't understand this at the time, only savoring the educational opportunity we had to capitalize on. Remembering the perspective of Bettina Love, it's vital teachers understand their students' everyday realities in order to better create change against the patterns of injustice (Love, 2019, p.132). Now I see his mom in an equitable perspective. As someone who is a single parent that was in the midst of looking for her family's permanent home, securing their transportation, managing appointments, doctors, haircuts, groceries and hefty laundry days. Between those and more, there might not have been enough space mentally or physically to manage an additional project and of that gravity.

While I found motivation taking responsibility for Crane's change of placement, and consider this process a success, by the end of the year I found failure as well. I was frustrated in my lack of attempts to introduce Crane to more advanced curriculum, but at the time it seemed lessons in empathy were far more pressing to be learned. The division between Crane and the rest of the class was expanding. As I was offering a snack to Jacob, Crane watched us, shaking his head, before blatting: He can't answer you Ms. Wilder! (personal communications, 2021 October 8)

Upon hearing the judgment, Jacob's head dropped low in response, Crane and I could both read his hurt.

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Crane, I know Jacob understands what he wants for a snack and I know he understood what you just said.

I'm sorry.

The incident with Jacob was a turning point for Crane. He expressed similar low expectations of Jacob that I used to have and I couldn't judge Crane's misperceptions, but reveal them. I explained to Crane how a field of two benefited Jacob, after that the two of them partnered up on art projects where Crane could draw and Jacob could pick the colors. He began to grow into the role of a class leader, always wanting to be first and best, but now considering others' efforts too. He realized his peer's strengths did not always match his own, at times they even had advantages over him. Sophie continued being the strongest reader, and she held the record for Flappy Dragon. Ismael was the best climber at recess and Jacob continued to have a winning attitude day after day.

One Wednesday, we were playing a round of Would You Rather where presentation slides are divided into two alternatives and students would stand on the side of which option they would prefer. It was Crane who reminded me that Jacob still needed to vote.

Leaning into his competitive nature, Crane began to improve his academics when our classroom visibility grew. I had the inspiration after a lecture at CGU TEP when Dr. Kaleb Rashad showed a hierarchy of motivation and engagement originally drafted by Ron Berger where students grow interest in projects as they grow visibility (Rashad, 2022). I needed higher stakes to make reading more desirable to him. Upon finding the school librarian had a tenderness for my students, I gained the courage to approach him about a library reading program. We arranged to jumpstart a twice weekly peer partner library program. I tapped on the general education students that were joining us to dance in the afternoons, I had little incentives to offer them but their interest was tangible. Crane was always excited to join an activity and upon seeing peers of a similar social level in the library, he had a new motivation to improve his own reading.

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Crane was reading at a 2.3 level when we ended the year, being two years behind his grade level made him eligible for a mild-moderate setting. It took the entirety of the school year to complete the assessments for his eligibility evaluation. Our school psychologist unexpectedly went out on medical leave before its completion so when the new school psychologist arrived, we began the process over again. His mom was forever patient during these obstacles and delays. Regardless of her hesitation about moving his placement prior, and her busy life managing multiple children as a single parent, she showed up for every IEP meeting. If there's another fact I learned from this year it is that the household supporters that do show up are your greatest allies.

Finally in the last month of school, one student who was being dragged in the undertows of the education current was pulled out and given new breath. Rather than launch Crane into his new setting for the final month of school, I retained him in my classroom until summer. With the IEP legally determined I could share more information with Crane regarding the changes happening next year. I shared with him that he would be changing school locations the following year and he took the opportunity to say bye to his friends on campus, especially Jacob.

Building Self

Sophie's reputation preceded her. She was known for having a pleasant attitude, her autism diagnosis made her keen on routines and she was successful accomplishing daily transitions with a quiet ease. Sophie would often opt to read as her free activity and at the start of the year she was decoding kindergarten level books. She enjoys being organized.

One day, it was unusual that Sophie did not start her morning journal after breakfast. I asked her why she had not started? No response.

Sophie, Is there something you need?

A pencil.

I investigated her things and found she had no writing supplies in her pencil box, a red flag regarding her typical organization. I found her materials scattered through Mia and Raiden's

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things. Upon returning them to Sophie, we wrote her name on every item, I modeled for her saying 'No' and directed her to verbalize to students 'Ask Ms. Wilder' should they need anything.

Half of my students had annual IEPs within the first two months of the school year. This is a huge disservice to these students, it gives the incoming teacher two months (or less) to meet the child, communicate with the household, assess their progress and form academic goals for the next year. Even after knowing this and suffering the consequences, I also did not reschedule these students' IEPs later in the year and perpetuated this injustice in our system, an error of my first year naivety and burnout. To remain in compliance, we needed to hold Sophie's annual IEP meeting by the fifth week of school.

Over the video conference IEP I was grateful for her mom's openness and honesty. The qualities I was admiring most about Sophie, like her quiet demeanor and compliance working throughout the school day, were the same qualities that worried her mom. Sophie would be attending middle school next year with a much larger class and campus; her mom carried a lot of fear about what could come to her daughter's quiet and compliant demeanor. I related these fears to the previous incident when peers were taking Sophie's things. More pressing still, her mom shared that she wasn't speaking at home. Null.

Together with the SLP, Mom and I developed a goal to encourage self agency. The SLP suggested we sabotage Sophie (personal communication, 2021). After I presented her with sentence frames to encourage expanding from her single word requests to four and five word phrases, the sabotage started. During breakfast, after requesting a food item using a phrase we would hand her an inedible object. If she asked for a banana, we would hand her a pencil. The goal being that she would protest or refuse the undesired object; after some practice Sophie excelled at saying no. We found activities throughout the day that could test her compliance, handing her a tissue when she needed a marker, or a stapler instead of her water bottle. Sophie recognized the pattern in these goals and within a couple weeks she became faster to respond

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and correct her perpetrator. The consistency in her improvement made me skeptical that our process was too repetitive.

One day during a Flappy Dragon tournament, an online counting game we all took turns competing in, I had written all the students' names on the board who wanted a turn to play. They were successful several rounds before the absence of sound (Irving, 1978) caught my attention. Sophie had the stylus held far above her head, out of Mia's reach who was jumping in hopes of collecting it. Sophie stared wide eyed at me.

Who's turn is it?

Sophie pointed to Raiden.

Does Mia want to go?

She nodded her head.

But it's Raiden's turn?

Nodded again.

She had not found her words or phrase for this type of scenario, but it was clear Sophie was budding agency and defiance. After handing Raiden the stylus I congratulated her on being so honest.



Sophie clearly began to find her own path, she no longer followed all Mia's prompts or demands at recess, she would not always give away her preferred items to Raiden. When Ismael excitedly came around to hit the video screen she would call out to him:

No Ismael!

Having more free time, one of the activities Sophie would often elect for was independent reading. In order to promote using her voice, I introduced her to a phonics phone, a

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hollow tube that echoes as you speak into it (a large thanks to my dad who crafted a phone for each of my students from PVC pipes). We would regularly hear her singing Pete The Cat (Litwin & Dean, 2010) from a corner of the room.

With her reading accelerating, I wanted to expand Sophie's less preferred academic areas. Her morning journal when I started the class was the same differentiated level as Raiden and Mia. It was their personal information, names and addresses, all printed in dotted letters to trace (see Appendix B). I found this problematic as Sophie was a stronger writer than her peers, her calligraphy was notably legible and she was transcribing words read aloud to her. I began altering her journals to increase the rigor.



The first journal template I made for Sophie used sentence frames which offered errorless choices (see Appendix B). I offered her a completed journal to model the goal of the new template. The first journal Sophie completed followed the teacher model exactly, the optional drawing space was even duplicated. The next alteration I made to her journal was to remove key elements such as the street number or zip code in order to assess her recollection of personal information. Sophie was able to complete these sentence frames independently. When journals involved self-choice, her comprehension would struggle. Sophie would copy the model made by the teacher exactly, without deciphering the options. For example when prompted for her last name she wrote her first, her age was 98 as the teacher model was, and the drawing was again directly replicated (see Appendix B). Upon giving feedback sparingly, and applauding when the correct information was filled out, Sophie began comfortably

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completing these daily journals. Like Domain Two of the CSJ Competencies (see Appendix A) she was steadily increasing her academic rigor.

Usually I had to guess Sophie's thoughts, but her eagerness to start journal in the morning was undeniable. My initial clue was her interest in receiving support. When her journal advanced to word puzzles she would approach my teacher's desk for help; prior morning journals with only tracing were an easily accomplishable and automotive routine. This was an opportunity to encourage Sophie to raise her hand for help, another strong lesson before middle school. I realized I had not modeled this expectation or routine for my students, whereas in my coming years, routines like this will be practiced in the first weeks of school.

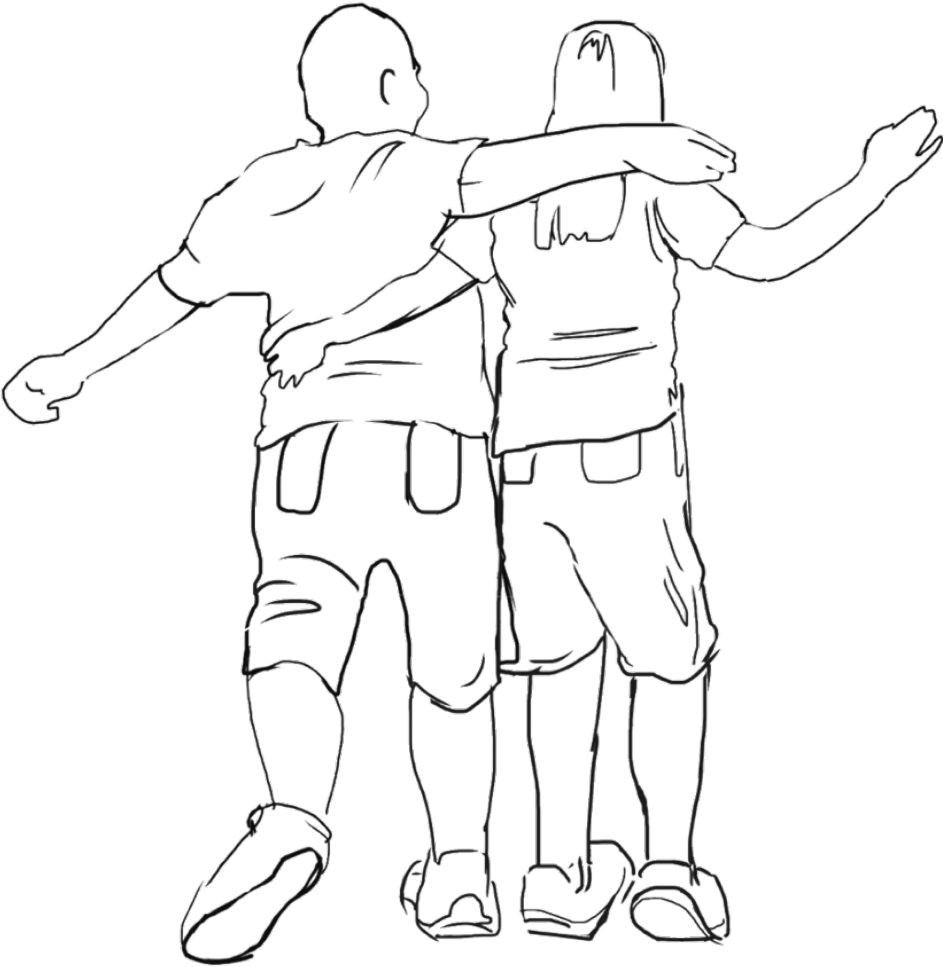
Again being a member of a non-disabled family I had forgotten mundane actions, such as raising your hand or sharpening your pencil must be explicitly taught to the students, multiple times, in order to be recalled. As I continue improving my awareness of student needs, I will continue to rely on the household's knowledge regarding this communication. These adults have experience teaching their students both intentionally and obliviously, and I will always be researching their methods.

Sophie needed more challenges and unfortunately I didn't explore these depths until Crane transferred into our classroom, his higher level academics pushed the entire classroom ecology to go farther. I would include Sophie in small group lessons with Crane and at times she excelled beyond her peer. Her love of routines and processes made math consumable, always remembering where to carry numbers or borrow from; when writing, her spelling exceeded even our general education visitors and her capacity to recall spelling corrections was outstanding.

Again, I did not foresee to push her academic boundaries without Crane joining our classroom, a disappointing oversight on my part. As mentioned in *Moving Through Systems*, I also did not extend Crane's academics to the lengths they could have stretched either, so by default Sophie was also affected. Acknowledging the successes we did have and the strides Sophie did make, I should have pressed another IEP later in the school year, early within the

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legal timeframe but allowing Sophie's next teacher to develop more time with her before the meeting. This would also have allowed myself to update her goals to honor her advancements in academics. While these reflections are ongoing and unforgiving in my mind, I can recognize they are moving in the positive direction that I want to continue being the advocate my students require and exceed the obligations of this career.





Conclusion

Seventeen months ago I was introduced to the field of special education and in that time I uncovered a large spectrum of possible disabilities and diagnoses the students in my career may have. I learned about the dense legalities of the special education field in California and glimpsed into other state systems nationwide. In one school year I accomplished eight annual IEPs, four interim transfers, one home and hospital transfer and one eligibility evaluation for a change of placement. It brings me pride knowing organization was not a strength of mine entering this field, but after balancing credential classes at nights and weekends while managing the demand of the daily classroom needs I am confident I will continue on my path of being a CSJ Educator (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) with greater ease every year.

Some educators will make the case that students with severe needs should not be included in the general education setting. Joining the teaching career during a pandemic meant I witnessed the field suffer the loss of a lot of institutional knowledge (Alfaro, personal communication, March 19, 2022). With so many new teachers beginning their teaching journey at this new phase there is opportunity to realign the goals of special education. The previous concepts from IDEA where students are to be educated alongside their typical peers and the school only needs to justify their decision to exclude them (Gargiulo & Bouck, 2018, p.70) is no

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longer proficient. These students will become the adults with disabilities in our society we currently ostracize. Students with special needs can be further included in general, not only public, education.

For Ismael inclusion was brought to him, it centered around his passion and strengths in music. Sophie was able to interact with peers her age in the library partner reading program, she made allies from these experiences and was offered their support during sixth grade activities. Crane was most frequently pulled out for general education inclusion opportunities and these periods are what he looked forward to most. Outside improving his academics, it gave him further social outlets. Simultaneously, he received the common inclusion benefits of awareness and empathy by being surrounded by peers with severe disabilities in our classroom.

So I've come to the end of this journey. Seventeen months of rigorous reading and grueling paperwork. Seventeen months of stress due to the fine balance of always running out of energy or time. Seventeen months to recognize my missteps and rebuild from my errors. In the TEP at CGU we learned to extend ourselves grace and I practiced how to start forgiving my shortcomings. In these seventeen months I found more purpose in my life than I thought I would ever offer: my new career paired with a focus on inclusion. For nine of those seventeen months, the most precious nine, we were able to build and celebrate a classroom ecology that no longer felt like an educational enclave.



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Key Terminology

Inclusion: The practice of merging general education and special education peers in the classroom or activities outside of the classroom.

Extensive Support Needs (ESN): In reference to students with moderate-severe disabilities, this categorization is now focused on the level of support the teachers should offer, rather than the level of severity the students' diagnoses demand.

Critical Social Justice Educator (Sensory & DiAngelo, 2017): One in the teaching profession who educates with foci in equity, care, respect and love for their students of all cultural backgrounds.

Dis/abilities (Connor et al, 2007; Gilborn et al., 2016): A new terminology coined by the group of scholars who all contributed to DisCrit. Dis/abilities differentiates the idea of lack of ability to the growth of future ability. It more so addresses the social and political misconstructions in the foundation of our society that have used the special education system and dis/ability diagnoses as a means to broadening and perpetuating the racial barriers in education and financial systems alike. While I continue to better understand the complexity of the term myself, a parent gave the concept high praise, claiming it honored their daughter's abilities.

Emergent Bilingual (Garcia, 2009): a student labeled Emergent Bilingual legally qualifies for additional English Supports and dedicated English advancement time in the regular school day. By favoring the term Emergent Bilingual over the more common English Learner (EL) I hope to identify and acknowledge these students Funds of Knowledge (CSJ).

Ethnography (Fetterman, 2009): Ethnography is a qualitative research of an individual or individuals and their cultures. It is a study exploring cultural phenomena, behaviors and interactions of the subject(s) in the study.

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Appendices

Appendix A: CGU TEP CSJ Teaching Domains, Relationships, Competency Strands

CGU TEP Critical Social Justice Teaching Domains, Relationships, Competency Strands	
Domain 1: <i>Philosophy of Education</i>	Relationships: <i>Purpose, Self, Content</i>
1.1	Grow Self-Awareness
1.2	Establish Baseline of Respect for Students & Their Learning
1.3	Develop Familiarity & Facility with The Curriculum
1.4	Take Responsibility for Students Learning & Engagement
Domain 2: <i>Pedagogy</i>	Relationships: <i>Teacher, Students, Content</i>
2.1	Introduce New Content & Skills in Engaging and Meaningful Ways
2.2	Make Productive Learning Accessible
2.3	Use Instructional Practices to Grow Students' Knowledge, Skills, & Understanding
2.4	Help Students Level Up with Steadily Increasing Rigor
Domain 3: <i>Science of Learning</i>	Relationships: <i>Students, Content, Self</i>
3.1	Use Data to Inform Instruction
3.2	Harness Instructional Cohesion
3.3	Use Assessments to Promote Learning & Understanding
Domain 4: <i>Socio-Emotional Learning</i>	Relationships: <i>Students, Self, Others</i>
4.1	Set & Demonstrate Expectations
4.2	Promote and Maintain A Pro-Social, Asset-Based Classroom Ecology
4.3	Use Knowledge of Students to Anticipate & Limit Unproductive Behavior
Domain 5: <i>Funds of Knowledge</i>	Relationships: <i>Teacher, Students, Households</i>
5.1	Support Productive Learning with Culturally Sustaining Practices
5.2	Identify & Meet Students Where They Are
5.3	Develop Productive & Inclusive Relationships with Households
Domain 6: <i>School Climate & Culture</i>	Relationships: <i>Teacher, School, Households</i>
6.1	Maintain Professional Responsibilities
6.2	Reconcile School & Personal Values, Beliefs, and Practices
Domain 7: <i>Community & Cultural Wealth</i>	Relationships: <i>Students, Households, Communities</i>
7.1	Raise Consciousness of Local Community & Cultural Wealth
Domain 8: <i>Socio-Political Identity</i>	Relationships: <i>Students, Others, Communities</i>
8.1	Raise Consciousness of Socio-Political Context
8.2	Share Power & Tools
Domain 9: <i>Global Perspective</i>	Relationships: <i>Others, Communities, The World</i>
9.1	Recognize and Acknowledge Bias in Curriculum & Media
9.2	Promote Comparative, Critical, And Global Perspectives

Appendix B: Progression of Journals

Date: _____

Sophie Last Name

Address line 1

Address line 2

Name: _____

Date: 09/28/2021

My favorite food is yogurt/cereal/pizza.

My favorite food is pizza.

I live in _____, California.


I live in _____, California.

My last name is _____.

My last name is _____.

I am 98 years old.

I am 98 years old.



Name: _____

Date: 09/08/21

I like to play games.

I like to play games.

