

Challenging the way I think about inclusion

The learning activity I want to talk about is the visit to Italian schools to see how children with autism are included in mainstream schools. I had been told that in Italy 99% of children go to mainstream schools. This was interesting for me as I only had experience from special schools in Greece and Italy and felt I had only having seen very bad examples of 'inclusion'. I specifically remember one of the cases we saw. I refer to a girl around 10 years old with autism with severe learning difficulties and no language. Although I was not convinced about the appropriateness and adaptation of the resources to meet her needs, I was struck by the fact that she was looking happy and content in her classroom with the typically developing peers. I started challenging my own view that special schools are the best places for children with autism and learning difficulties to be educated. I started wondering whether under certain circumstances inclusion in mainstream school might be the right choice. Is the academic challenge more important than being at the same schools with children from the same neighborhood? I became very curious to find out whether and how inclusion can be tried out for the specific population. As a result, I went home and read more about classroom management/role of TAs to facilitate inclusion, as well as a range of studies on inclusion. I talked to students of mine (i.e. teachers) from Wales where children with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties are included in mainstream schools (units). I talked to parents from special schools (I currently only have access to them) to get their views. I would like to do a big research project on views of inclusion for children with autism and complex needs. As part of this, I would like people with autism, parents and teaching staff to participate in questionnaires, but I would also like school observations to be conducted by independent researchers so that there we can do an in-depth examination of whether inclusion really does happen for children with autism and additional complex needs.

One participant stated the following about the research phase: I felt irritated by the analysis of working instead of just doing- academic versus practice. I learned that there is value (financial) in thought, analysis and understanding. We now offer as part of our organization: services, analysis and consultation. Outcome: larger client base, more financial reward for

our organization. Using this understanding, we can support the project and our other clients (many within autism world (better)).

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