How can *Mind Shift* promote inclusion and program specificity for students with learning disabilities or learning differences and improve student learning in Grand Erie District School Board?

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Mind Shift Team- Sharon Laidlaw, Dale McManis, Karin Mertins, Tracy McConnell, Liana Thompson

Abstract

"Needless suffering occurs whenever children grow up disappointing themselves and the adults who care about them. Often they do so because they perform inadequately in school. Unfortunately, these children come to question their own worthiness, as they gaze about their minds, believing that somehow they are defective or inferior. We are describing the sad plight of children who have difficulty performing certain highly age_specific roles that are needed to keep pace with the demands imposed in school. These young students often create confusion in their parents and their teachers. They bewilder themselves as well. This [Program] sets out to diminish that shared confusion, to enable all concerned to construct a better understanding of the reasons for an individual child's exasperating and often futile struggles to keep pace and feel effective." Dr. Mel Levine Educational Care, 1994

Mind Shift: to change how you see a situation and then change what you're doing about it.

The challenge came from our Superintendent. " Do we want a self-contained class for students with learning disabilities in our family of schools ?" Karin and Dale came back from their practicum session for Schools Attuned with the idea of withdrawing students with learning disabilities and running a program for them similar to withdrawal programs for gifted learners. We applied for an educational change fund. This was the creation of Mind Shift.

Mind Shift is a four-day conference for students with learning disabilities and/or learning differences. The students received direct instruction in the use of assistive technology, practiced self-advocacy skills, and gained an appreciation of their learning strengths. The student's teacher and Learning Resource Teacher were invited to attend the final day for the celebration and so the student could teach them about the assistive technology. The learning opportunity shaped the perceptions of the students and teachers about learning differences. We, the facilitators of Mind Shift, became the teachers, learners and observers at the conference.

Our goals for the students at Mind Shift:

•   discovering individual learning strengths and celebrating diversity;
•   developing self advocacy skills;
•   learning to use text to speech software effectively;
•   troubleshooting and looking after computer hardware;
•   enhancing of students literacy;
•   gathering data to explore whether this alternative model of time limited but intensive program is viable.

What we hope to shift:

•   how students with learning disabilities view themselves;
•   how teachers of students with learning disabilities see these students;
•   how we deliver special education services to students with learning disabilities.

Our guide for teaching the students about learning differences is Dr. Mel Levine. Dr Levine is a paediatrician, a Rhodes scholar, an author and he is the director of the University of North Carolina's Clinical Centre for the Study of Development and Learning. He is the co-founder and co-chair of All Kinds of Minds and the Schools Attuned teacher training program.

The Mind Shift Team used an application process to help choose students for the program. Criteria for coming to Mind Shift included being a Junior or Intermediate student (Grades 4-8), being identified as learning disabled through the IPRC (Identification, Placement and Review) process or being eligible for diagnosis. The student's primary learning difference needed to be in the area of reading and writing. We also needed to know if the student had any ISA funded equipment and finally why the school believed that the student was a good candidate. Also important, was the classroom teacher and/or learning resource teacher willing to participate on Day 4 of the cycle?

The 20 participating students represented twelve different schools in the Brant North and Simcoe Family of Schools. Of the 20 students who were in the program, fifteen students had been diagnosed with learning disabilities. Eight of the students have computer equipment through ISA 1. Four students had Kurzweil or textHELP Read and Write Gold available to them at their school. At the end of the conference we were able to apply for ISA 1 grants for seven of the students who did not have equipment.

We decided that we would have a theme that we would focus on each day. For the first group the themes were:

Affinities (Something that you really love to do or learn about)
Reading Difficulties
Organization/ Self Advocacy
Attention

The second group was very different from our first group in that it took more time for the group to become cohesive. All but two students from Group One spent 30 minutes riding a bus together each

way which helped the students become familiar with each other. They were able to develop meaningful social interaction from Day 1. Group Two didn't have that option, because they came on different buses and arrived at different times due to geography.

Throughout the program the students learned about taking care of the computers that they have, and how to use two different types of programs. We focused on scan and read programs, (Kurzweil, textHELP! Read and Write Gold) and a word prediction program (Co:Writer). We also used Dr. Levine's, philosophy, videos and written materials. Intertwined throughout the conference we used activities from the Tribes program because the philosophy fit our goals so well. The Tribes philosophy promotes the four agreements of mutual respect, attentive listening, appreciation/no put downs, and the right to pass. Tribes activities cover the areas of inclusion building, influence building, and community building.

The importance of having students with similar learning difficulties was clear to both the students and to us. Sharon wrote in her Reflective Journal Oct 24, 2004,

> "Bringing together students with similar exceptionalities, and learning difficulties is important. In our Gifted program we bring together students once a week to offer them a program that allows them to be with their intellectual peers and meets their needs. Students with learning disabilities also need that opportunity, so that they can understand that they are not the only student with a learning difference. They need an opportunity to learn from each other. They also need some specific training on computers, so that they can use them to bypass what they can't do." The students realized this too. After the first day one student commented to me, "It was nice being with others who have problems reading like me. No one made fun of you or called you names like 'special ed retard' because I have to use a computer to help me."

There was a look of relief on some students' faces when they saw that everyone else at Mind Shift had reading problems too.

The Guiding Principles in Special Education for the Grand Erie District School Board state that we need to offer a range of placements. Having the option of a withdrawal program for students with learning disabilities is a benefit for these students. They are placed in a regular class and they need to have some support in learning the assistive technology that will assist them in bypassing their weakness.

We were very surprised at the lack of computer skills that the students brought with them to the conference. Typing skills were weak, as was use of the mouse pad on the laptops. One student was actually using two hands to move the mouse. Since one of the most important computer skills is keyboarding, we had students working on All the Right Type and playing Solitaire to develop the

skills. It was also interesting to discover that of the eight students who had a laptop at school assigned to them, two laptops had not been taken out of their packaging and two students had never used their computers even though we had already finished two months of school. Once in the Mind Shift program students were quick to realize that using computers and the scan and read and word prediction software would help them do their work and be more successful in school.

Throughout the program we were able to see the importance of assistive technology for the students. One journal entry that the student's needed to complete was "Why is using Kurzweil and Co:Writer important to you."

Kurzweil is helpful to me because it reads to me so I can remember.
Kurzweil can scan stuff from a book.
Kurzweil is helpful because it highlights.

what I like to improv is.
to de deter at right type.
and skan a lot and yos kurzweil.
Andcowriter.

Emily, grade 7

The first section was written using Co:Writer (Word Prediction Program), the second section the student didn't use Co:Writer. It is easy to see the benefits of the program. The student was able to write in complete sentences and is able to spell words correctly, and easily communicate his ideas.

Voices of the Students

 "Three things I liked today was getting to work on the computer, getting to meet new people, and learning about how my brain works. I really like it here. I wish it was longer, not just 4 days."

 "Co writer would help me in school because I would be able to type my work instead of writing it out. And my work would be neater. It would correct some of the spelling mistakes. Kurzweil would help me because it reads the work faster then I could. And I would get work done faster. If kurzweil was reading I could concentrate more on understanding it. I plan to work on a typing program at school and at home. To get better at typing. It would to type the work than wright it."
        Kyle, grade 8

"It [Co:Writer, text HELP Read and Write Gold] will help me with my reading and writing. It will help me catch up on my work at school. It will help me be just as smart as the smart kids in the class"
        Megan, grade 4

"I would like to use Kurzweil and a scanner to read books a lot faster then if I tried to read it myself."

Adam, grade 8

Voices of the Teachers

"Thank you on behalf of our group for providing an excellent workshop for the teachers and an program for our children. You are an inspiration to all of us and we are so very fortunate to have professionals like yourselves who are dedicated to our children who have difficulties in learning. Your commitment to our students was evident when our students were provided with a 4-day workshop and they came away from it with greater self-esteem and understanding of how they learn. They can now come to class and teacher their teacher and their peers about their newly learned program. Their self-confidence soared during our time with them for their Celebrations day. Students who would not necessarily share their thoughts felt relaxed and at ease. Thank you for a wonderful experience".

"Seeing my student and another student in my school in control and the master of their area, I was able to see pride, self advocacy, and recognition of them being a special needs student. It was possible to see them other then always asking for help".

"Huge difference in the student, they are full of confidence, drawing diagrams on the computer, Excited, able to keep up the pace of the class. Using his laptop in groups, able to pull his own weight. He has a new place in the class, more accepted. This is a huge advantage for school work".

"The two students at my school are so excited about the technology, that I am feeling excited about learning about computers myself. I have lacked the confidence on them and have avoided computers."

Follow-up

To measure growth in targeted areas we sent out Three-Month Check-up questionnaires to the students and to their teachers.

Thirteen of the twenty students who participated in Mind Shift have the use of text to speech software (Kurzweil, textHELP! Read and Write Gold), eleven of those students use the software sometimes or

everyday. When you consider that two students had not even had their computers unpacked and two students had not used their computers, this is a significant increase.

The data indicates that the students who participated are feeling more successful, are asking for help more, are better prepared for school, and are using the organizational strategies that were taught at Mind Shift. (see Check-up for students)

Schools were also quick to share information with the Mind Shift team when they visited a participant's school. The following was shared with Dale McManis by two teachers at one school. "R's productivity in the class and capacity to complete his work on his own has improved. His self concept as a learner has also increased. "K's results have improved with the use of technology and school personnel report that K is more engaged with his school program. His capacity and motivation to complete school work with age appropriate independence has been significantly enhanced". (Conversation with Dale McManis January 4, 2005)

Lessons Learned

•   Four days is enough time to teach students specific skills.

•   Four days is enough time to instill hope.

•   There is value in having the conference 'off site'.

•   Attendance of their classroom teachers is very important to the students.

•   It was very beneficial to have a team of people from psychology and education whose combined skills suited the delivery of this model.

•   Recognizing the affinities of ourselves and others increases tolerance and understanding of individual differences.

Conclusion

At the end of the conference we were very tired and though we felt overloaded, we were also extremely pleased and excited about what we were able to do for students. We were able to start some exciting conversations with the Principal Leader for Special Education about how we can improve education for students with Learning Disabilities. We need to give them the best of both worlds, being able to stay at their home school with their peer groups and being able to develop technology skills at Mind Shift. Through full implementation of Educational Change Fund we will be able to offer four groups of Mind Shift serving 40 students with Learning Disabilities.

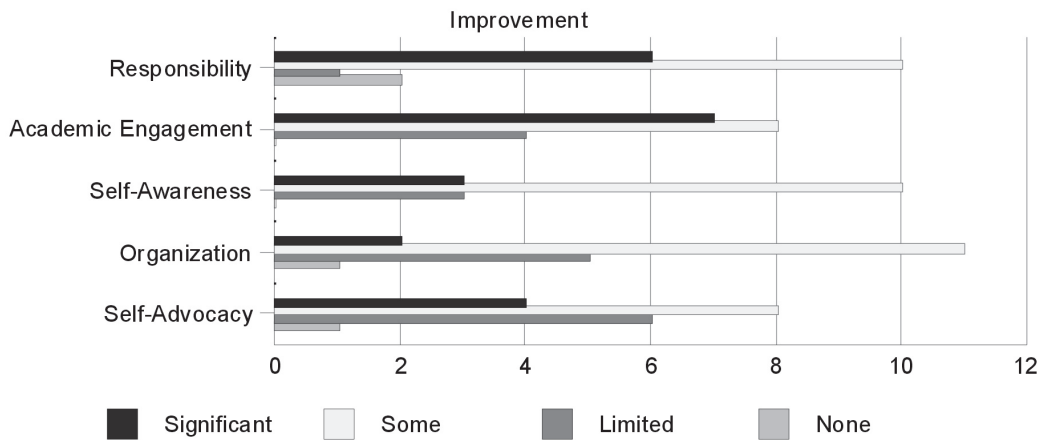We need to continue to give teachers the opportunity to understand that everyone learns differently, and that we need to respect and support those differences. One student remarked that her teacher always says put your pencil down when she is speaking and that they have to sit still. There is a lack of understanding that a student can be playing with something and still be listening to the teacher.

Or that because a student is moving around or not sitting in their seat the are not good listeners or good students is wrong. We need to continue to work with teachers in developing tolerances of differences. We all learn differently and it is the teachers responsibility to teach students that, and to remember that themselves. (Reflective Journal November 9, 2004)

"I am happy!"

Check-up for Teachers

Improvement

Category	Data
Responsibility	Significant: 6, Some: 10, Limited: 1, None: 2
Academic Engagement	Significant: 7, Some: 8, Limited: 4
Self-Awareness	Significant: 3, Some: 10, Limited: 3
Organization	Significant: 2, Some: 11, Limited: 5, None: 1
Self-Advocacy	Significant: 4, Some: 8, Limited: 6, None: 1

(x-axis: 0, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12)

Legend: ■ Significant □ Some ▨ Limited ▨ None

Check up for Students

Category	
Ask for Help	
Feel Successful	
Use Computer	
Prepared	
Organization	

Legend: ■ Almost Always □ Often ▨ Sometimes ▨ Rarely