Special Education in American Sāmoa

by Kate Moran

From Segregation to Inclusion

In the early 1970s, American Sāmoa’s Department of Education (ASDOE), like many other public school districts across the United States, responded quickly to the federal government’s initiative to support special education programs and provide services in the field of disabilities. The original program began in 1971 with services for deaf, hard of hearing, speech impaired, and hospital bound students. The program was a modest one with a total of seven staff who provided services for seven full-time and approximately thirty-five part-time students. Program growth has been consistent and as of last year the Special Education Division housed over two hundred staff to provide services to approximately 1,300 school age students identified with a disability.

The expansion of the Special Education Division over the past five years has been remarkable. Three special education program coordinators have been added to the special education administrative team that now totals four program coordinators and one director. Support services staff has also increased dramatically and last year a certified speech and language therapist, a certified school psychologist, a licensed physical therapist, and approximately twenty other support and related services personnel were on staff. The number of special education teachers assigned to classrooms, small groups, and individual students has also increased. Each elementary and secondary school now has a special education resource specialist housed at the school who is responsible for the coordination and delivery of special education services at the school site.

These changes from a small, centralized special education delivery system to a decentralized model has been prompted partly by the commitment of special education leaders and parents to an inclusion philosophy that supports the integration of special education students into the mainstream of their village schools. Many children who were previously bused to self-contained, centrally located classroom on the island are now schooled in their home village with family, neighbors, and friends. With the new model many more special education students now have access to the general education curriculum.

A Highly Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom

Dr. Lui Tuitele, director of education, has been diligent in leading the department’s efforts to place highly qualified teachers in all classrooms, as recommended by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. The department efforts have focused on financially supporting classroom teachers in obtaining an undergraduate degree and teaching certification as well as ensuring that teachers are placed in teaching positions in which they are certified.

While some support has been provided for graduate level degrees in specialized areas, financial support has primarily focused on providing assistance to under-trained classroom teachers to obtain degree status and certification in their area of teaching. Each year the American Sāmoa government offers increasing amounts of scholarship funding for teacher training, especially in high-need areas such as math, science, and special education. In particular, special education teachers are encouraged to pursue teacher certification in specific disability areas.

A commitment of this magnitude is no easy task for an island without an accredited four year college within a radius of 2,600 miles, a government budget that secures only 37 percent of funding from local revenue and 63 percent from US grants, a school population that is 98 percent eligible for the free breakfast and lunch programs, and a teacher population with fewer than 50 percent possessing a teaching degree. Regardless of these obstacles, the government is determined to place a highly qualified teacher in every classroom. As a result, teachers who are currently employed by the ASDOE, and who have yet to obtain the necessary credentials have been put on notice to return to school and get a degree or run the risk of losing their job. The movement towards a four-year, teacher-training program at the local community college may help alleviate the teacher shortage in some areas; however, there has been no discussion of including training for special education teachers. This omission is alarming as the percentage of degreed teachers in special education is even lower than the percentage of degreed teachers in general education. Approximately one-third of the special education teachers in American Sāmoa possess a teaching degree and less than 1 percent of these teachers hold a certification in a specific disability area.

Special Education Teacher Preparation in the Cohort Program

Currently, the majority of credentialed special education teachers are graduates of the University of Hawai‘i’s teacher training cohort program that offers a dual preparation strand. Approximately 20 percent of the cohort applicants apply for this strand and obtain a teaching degree and teaching certification in both general and special education. (For a more complete description of the cohort program, see the article by Dr. Peggy Haleck in this issue).

The cohort program requires students to complete fifty-one credits in professional education core courses and
eighteen credits in elementary education emphasis courses. Candidates in the dual preparation strand are required to take an additional twenty-seven credits in special education coursework. This coursework covers such topics as inclusive school practices, partnerships with families, classroom organization, behavior management, student assessment, reading strategies, technology, and disability awareness and policies. Dual preparation teacher candidates must also complete student teaching in both a general education classroom and a special education classroom.

While the dual preparation strand has helped increase the number of special education teachers considerably, other factors operate that add to the critical shortage of qualified special education teachers. Approximately forty teachers have graduated from the dual preparation strand of the cohort program but discouragingly only 46 percent of those trained teachers have remained in the classroom. As is the case in many developing education systems, American Sāmoa’s new graduates are often recruited into newly created or “turn over” administrative and specialist positions, thus leaving many special education classrooms still without a qualified teacher.

Other systemic problems have an impact on the special education teacher shortages too. While there is minimal self-initiated teacher migration from special education to general education, special education teachers have been recruited with some reluctance to fill positions in general education-teaching classrooms. Additionally, American Sāmoa does not have a pool of substitute teachers and special education teachers are often drawn away from their classrooms for an extended period of time to meet the general education teacher shortage. Setting aside the illegality of this practice, such actions send a discouraging, second-class-citizen message to the community about students and individuals with disabilities. In the meantime, external factors such as population growth and higher identification rates continue to add to the critical shortage of qualified teachers in classrooms and programs.

Preparing Teachers of Students with Low Incidence Disabilities

While the dual preparation strand addresses the training needs of teachers working with students with mild to moderate disabilities, it is not designed to address the more specialized training needs of teachers who work with children with severe or low incidence disabilities. Overall there are thirteen recognized disability areas, each with its own specialized body of knowledge; specific teaching materials, equipment, strategies; and set of recommended practices. For example, students who are blind or deaf must have specialized equipment to read or obtain information from the printed page of a history or science book. In addition, they must have specialized equipment in order to demonstrate to the “seeing or hearing” teacher what they have learned. Curriculums also must be adapted—obviously a reading program based on a phonetic approach is not the most beneficial curriculum for a child who cannot hear. In this case, adaptations may include different curriculums or reading programs that are based on a visual approach.

School districts also need credentialed support staff in related service areas such as physical and occupational therapy, assistive technology, health and medical services, psychological and assessment services, social work and counseling services, and speech and language services. Certification in each of these areas demands intensive training that the dual preparation strand of the cohort program is not designed to accommodate.

Good faith efforts have been made to recruit qualified personnel but the district is not competitive in compensation, and while the lure of island living does draw some certified professionals to American Sāmoa, their stay is often limited and the search for qualified staff must be resumed. Thus increased investment in local personnel living in American Sāmoa is preferred. Yet not all interested American Samoan teachers are able to leave their families to pursue lengthy specialized training in a specific disability area. As a result local, special education certification programs for special education teachers are being developed.

Currently there are three special education local certification programs in operation: one for assistive technology teachers, one for assessment specialists, and one for speech and language teachers. A fourth certification program for teachers of the blind has been implemented. Each program consists of one to two hundred hours of instruction with additional hours of fieldwork. The curriculum is organized into modules and is usually conducted on island, though some work has been completed in small classes in Hawai‘i. Instructors in each of the certification programs must hold an advanced degree and national certification in the specific content area.

Local teacher certification programs are not meant to replace national certification programs, and graduates are encouraged to apply and supported through graduate programs that offer degrees and national certification in the specific disability areas. In the meantime, the local programs have been invaluable in providing selected teachers with a set of specific skills, instructional strategies, and equipment. They have also been a source of reassurance to parents that there are trained teachers available who do have specialized knowledge and understanding of their child’s unique needs.

Effects of Using Untrained Personnel Over Time

Over an extended time there has been a consistent lack of trained special education teachers, related services personnel, and certified assessment personnel in the various disability areas. This has been a tremendous hindrance to the development of appropriate special education programming
in American Sämoa, and for many the underlying causes of poor academic learning gone undetected. For many years, with no credentialed assessment personnel to determine ability, achievement, and the extent to which the disability interferes with learning, special education placements were almost exclusively based on reading achievement. Typically a general education classroom teacher would identify students who were reading either one or two grades levels below grade level or who tested in the lowest percentile of their class in reading scores. These students were placed in a target group and were to receive additional assistance from their general education classroom teacher along with special education personnel support. If, after one year, the student had not improved, he or she was placed in a special education class. This singular diagnostic approach virtually established remedial reading as the predominant special education intervention for students with mild and moderate disabilities.

Even today, many students’ Individualized Educational Program (IEP) written plans are weighted towards reading goals and objectives alone and are alarmingly similar for all students. Evidence of inadequate provisions is revealed in several federal monitoring reviews reporting that goals and objectives in academic areas other than reading were lacking. Furthermore, IEPs looked ‘too alike’ to suggest that they were actually individualized and targeted to address an individual’s unique needs.

One devastating consequence of these generic assessment and placement practices is that, for many students, their special education programming is limited to remedial reading classes alone. For example, it is not beneficial to place a student with a short-term memory deficit in a remedial reading program where short-term memory skills are required. In this case, it is only the symptom that is being addressed (poor reading), not the disabling condition or under lying cause of the poor reading—short-term memory deficit. An even more devastating effect, particularly for high school students, is that these repetitive, unsuccessful reading classes are taken in place of other important classes such as English or electives. In some high schools, credits or units earned in remedial reading classes are used to meet the four-year English requirement for graduation. Thus, for many students, two hours of potentially beneficial instruction is lost to two hours of unsuccessful remedial reading instruction. Information and learning does not come from the printed page alone and to deny a student access to other classes where learning through discussion can occur in order to attend hours of remedial reading classes is irresponsible and ineffective educational programming.

While the ASDOE is to be applauded for introducing a comprehensive reading program that brings with it comprehensive teacher training and identical resources to village schools across the island, it should be noted that it is a single approach and there are no alternative approaches for students who are failing in this program. Relegating children year after year to a remedial reading program as the predominate special education intervention fails to address any underlying disorders. Remedial reading classes alone are not the answer. Parents often ask, “Why do we allocate so many resources and spend so much money and time identifying students when what is offered to them is a remedial reading class?” They are right to ask this question. Good special education programming is not a double dose of remedial reading classes.

Inclusive education creates change

Setting aside for the moment the various acknowledged social, religious, educational, and cultural explanations for why a child has a disability, the truth is that there are children (as well as adults) who learn differently. One thing we do know for sure, however, is that children learn from other children—perhaps even more than they learn from adults. It is tremendously motivating—socially, emotionally, and academically—to look like your friend, talk like your friend, and be recognized by your friend. Separating children with disabilities from children without disabilities does a disservice to both and the special education division is to be applauded in its efforts to move from an educational model that isolated children to an inclusion model that brings all children together.

Of course, adults do have anxieties that the needs of a child with a different learning style may have a negative influence on classroom activity and learning. But not only has the multiply intelligence theory (Gardner, 1993) shown that all children have different contributions to make to classroom learning, the children themselves have learned, and have taught the adults that they do not change just because of who sits next to them in the classroom. The beliefs of a person who sits next to you in a meeting does not singularly change your beliefs and the child who sits next to your child in class does not singularly change your child’s approach to learning. In fact, we find that children learn a great deal by helping each other. One of the most powerful learning tools, and a tool that is used in many educational settings to increase retention, is to teach another person what you know.

Research shows that placing children together who are at different levels of ability increases their chances of learning more than placing children together who are at the same ability level. We all learn differently, at different rates, at different times, and according to our different intelligences. Placing children in a classroom with age-appropriate peers, in spite of all the variety within the group, is self-affirming and educative. But inclusion inevitably places new demands on administrators and teachers.

Schools need to make structural adaptations such as ramps for wheel chairs, allow specialized equipment to be readily available in the classroom, or even accept books on
tapes in the classrooms for the non-readers. Personnel at all levels need to accept the challenge of making schools functional for all children. This may include new and sometimes expensive equipment that needs to be located in a secure place and made readily available. While the special education department is responsible for purchasing these items, all administrators need to offer their assistance in finding space for children to use the equipment and space to store the equipment securely when not in use. Available space for special education students becomes even more important as children with more severe disabilities are returned to their village schools. Not all of these children will be in full-time general education classes, and so the question becomes, “Where will their small group instruction be conducted?” The resource room at Matafao Elementary School has proven to be an excellent way to accommodate students who spend time in both general and special education programming.

Successful inclusion also requires training for general education teachers. The general belief that special education students are not members of their class and are the responsibility of the special education teacher alone is damaging and contributes to the students’ sense of exclusion. General education teachers need training to understand the goals and objectives of placing special needs students in general education classrooms. It is important, for example, for them to understand that children are sometimes included in general education programs for socialization, while others are included for instruction. A child may not be able to read at grade level; nevertheless they may be able to comprehend the content discussed in the history class or the social studies class. Specialized equipment and personnel are available to assist non-reading students in obtaining the content from textbooks. Activities such as class projects, group discussions, plays, and field trips make important contributions to learning of all students. Schools and classrooms are already very accommodating of students with mild disabilities. However, the increase in numbers of students with moderate to severe disabilities returning to their village schools will create more challenges.

Successful inclusion also requires the community to change their thinking. To be excluded by your peers because of well-meaning, yet uninformed, adult perceptions that special education students should be protected effectively perpetuates isolation. Such thinking keeps the child from learning, from participating, and from coping with and adapting to their world. In the long run, it deprives them of some of the fulfillments of childhood and of the opportunity of learning to function as an adult with other non-disabled adults. Life long dependency can be eliminated with education and appropriate actions. Thus, if the inclusion initiative is to succeed, the special education division has an important role to play in educating administrators, teachers, and parents about the importance of inclusion for special education students as well as other students and the community as a whole.

Questions of success and sustainability

Is special education in American Sämoa failing? Not at all, and in fact when our service delivery system is compared to systems on other South Pacific islands, we excel. But can we improve? Of course! Special education procedures and polices that are clearly written and aligned to the newly adopted federal laws need to be available to families, teachers, and administrators. Also, the IEP process—the formal process that drives identification, placement, and services to special education students and their families—needs a thorough review. These two efforts alone will go a long way in assuring equity and quality across American Sämoa for all children.

Much has been said about the influences of a mainland or “westernized” system on American Sämoa’s systems and culture. There is strong support for each side of the discussion about whether these influences are harmful or helpful—probably the real answer to this persistent debate is somewhere in between these extremes. But if we hold true the sociological theories that purport that the education system of a country is one of the most important systems to hold, to advance, and to pass on the culture in which it operates, then the debate is very important and needs to be taken very seriously. Yet where is a board of education that can help educational leaders hear what families, ministers, community leaders, and business people really want for our next generation? While a board of education to some may be yet another “westernized” construct, does American Sämoa offer its families other options for developing an open forum for discussion, for real representation, and for some resolution of appropriate school policies and procedures?

More than any other group, families with individuals with disabilities need to have a voice, a voice that will be heard. Their interactions with the local education leaders are understandably different from families with children who are not disabled. Yes special circumstances are necessary; yes special equipment is necessary, and yes school buildings need some redesigning. Yet the federal government allocates additional funding for programming for children with special needs; money to pay for special education programming is not taken from the general education budget. With all this in place, it then falls on all people to consider different ideas, to consider a change in their perceptions, to consider changing their action, to consider changing their beliefs of who can learn and who cannot. These changes toward accepting all children equally into our schools, into our community, and into our culture speak to the integrity of the whole population.

References