

# A Case Study: What is Better for His Future?

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This case describes the implementation of inclusive education within a mainstream secondary school on the example of the experience of a student with a cognitive developmental delay, whose special educational needs limit his academic participation and socialization in a school learning environment. The policy initiative is administered by the school principal who needs to make a decision about the best option in addressing the situation. This case narrative both highlights the complexity of the policy execution, the challenges the school principal encounters when designing actions in ensuring student's participation; and reflects ethical issues involved in the provision of special educational services. While there are no straight-forward solutions to meeting all students' diverse needs, this case provides helpful lessons for educational leaders working in accommodating students with special educational needs.

*Keywords:* inclusion, leadership, mainstream school, special school, student development.

## Case Narrative

This case narrates the story of the school principal, who implements inclusive education in a school, and describes the experience of a student with a cognitive developmental delay, whose special educational needs hinder learner's academic participation and socialization in a school learning environment. While describing the complexity of the policy execution, this narrative provides some practical lessons for educational leaders working in accommodating learners with special educational needs; the study employs pseudonyms for the characters.

Laura, will henceforth be referred to, has recently become a principal in the state secondary school of Karaganda, Kazakhstan. The school exists since 1992 and annually enrolls about 500 students living in the assigned district. Most of the students in this school are from the middle-income families, and about 20% of students are from low-income households, who receive government support. Over the course of several years, this school has been known for the high rates in student academic achievement tests and teaching quality assessments. The majority of school educators are highly qualified veteran teachers with over 25 years working experience in teaching positions.

Although this is a mainstream school, Laura with her previous experience in inclusive educational leadership decided to modify the school vision and mission to make it inclusive for diverse students. She views teaching methods and practices as the key to successful implementation of inclusive education, and strongly believes that every child can learn regardless of their abilities and needs.

Laura initiated a meeting with the school staff to introduce core values and principles of inclusion, and to discuss strategic development of inclusive practices in the new school. Before this meeting she conducted a short survey about common and specific teacher concerns, questions and suggestions that her colleagues had regarding the school transformation. This allowed her to form a clear understanding of the existent challenges that teachers faced in their classrooms to further address them with appropriate inclusive practices.

A case of Adil, will henceforth be referred to, a teenager from the 8th grade, has drawn her attention the most because all teachers who worked in his class submitted complaints and concerns about his behavioral issues and low academic performance. Therefore, Laura decided to take a closer look at this case with the hope to resolve the issue in the nearest future.

Having explored the background of this student, Laura found out that he comes from a low-income family, and was abandoned by both parents at a very young age. Grandmother is assigned as his official caregiver at the moment, but her poor health condition does not allow her to be fully engaged in child's development. Adil is a new student at this school, the majority of the school years he spent at a different state school in Karaganda, which was closed recently due to a low number of enrolled students. Adil's problems with cognitive development and socialization are now the main concerns for teachers in the new school. He has difficulties with following the curriculum and processing new information, hyperactivity and distracted attention, which lead to problems with following teachers' instructions, he also has poor memory and difficulties in social interactions caused by rather

aggressive attitude towards his peers. As most of the teachers in his class are veteran teachers, they have a certain pattern for effective teaching practices and norming behavior of students (Brookfield, 1995). Adil does not fall into the norming pattern, and as the result is excluded from the general class participation.

Because of his behavior and negative teachers' attitudes towards his class engagement, the school has sent Adil to the Psychological Medical Pedagogical Commission (PMPC) to determine whether he should continue education at a mainstream school or be transferred to the special one (MES, 2014). PMPC diagnosed Adil with a cognitive developmental delay and a generalized anxiety disorder which resulted in their recommendation to educate the student in a specialized educational institution with a simplified curriculum that Adil would be able to follow easily.

Having received the PMPC recommendation, teachers strongly insist on transferring Adil to a special school because he disturbs the overall teaching and learning process in his class and cannot follow the standard curriculum. His teachers also highlight that they lack knowledge on provision for special educational needs, and are not able to apply individualized teaching practices for specific needs of Adil. Besides, they are concerned that their focus on inclusive practices will increase workload and might result in decreased achievement of other students. Apart from that, they are largely concerned with Adil's participation in the Unified National Test next year as his failure in the exam might result in the lower school rating and poor assessment of teachers' performance.

Laura, on the other hand, being a strong advocate for inclusive education believes that students with special needs should be educated in the less restrictive mainstream school environment. But instead of competing with their typically developing peers, they should work on the individualized educational plan (IEP) which sets attainable goals for diverse students and is designed with respect to their needs (ANAE, 2015; Turnbull, 1995). She understands, however, that in-service school teachers do not know how to develop and work on IEPs. Moreover, at the moment they are confident that it is too late to start working on Adil's academic and social development (Brookfield, 1995; Razer & Friedman, 2017). It requires a lot of time to deliver knowledge on inclusive education and work with IEP to these teachers and during this time Adil will continue being left behind. However, as he is a high school student and will soon leave school this case asks for immediate actions.

Laura also contacted Adil's grandmother regarding his problems at school to discuss PMPC recommendation. However, grandmother is strongly against sending Adil to a special school being confident that he is able to learn in the mainstream one without striving for excellence in education.

Now Laura is faced with a dilemma. She understands that her mainstream school cannot accommodate Adil's needs at this very moment, which results in his exclusion being a struggling and low performing student. His social interactions are also quite negative as he often shows aggressive behavior towards peers and even teachers. Thus, it is unlikely that Adil's participation and education will be effective in this school. But even though the special school can offer the simplified curriculum attainable for Adil, this is most likely to result in his further marginalization due to the restricted environment, isolation from mainstream peers, as well as due to stigma associated with students from special schools which might limit Adil's future education and employment perspectives (O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006).

Then Laura started to explore the previous school experience of Adil. She reviewed available materials and met with some of his previous teachers. They admitted that problems with Adil's development and behavior emerged mainly in his early teenage years. He struggled with following the curriculum and new subjects added from the 5th grade which resulted in his overall low motivation to study. Most teachers allowed him to be inactive in the classroom as long as he was quiet and did not disturb the lesson. On the other hand, from the 6th grade at the previous school Adil developed a great interest in boxing, and entered a student boxing club which helped with his anger management. After being transferred to the new school, which does not have a boxing or fighting club, now Adil accumulates aggressive energy and then is more likely to attack his classmates to release this energy. Grandmother cannot afford sending Adil to private fighting clubs as even with the government support, they live in a quite poor household.

## Case Solution

Laura decides that her school should try everything possible in the current conditions to include Adil to the educational and socialization process by addressing his development via designing an IEP for him. She conducted a teachers' meeting and explained her concerns regarding the possible marginalization of Adil. Several teachers agreed to work on accommodating his needs by setting SMART goals for his personal, academic and social development. Then, Laura invited teachers from the special school to share their knowledge on simplified school curriculum with her school staff. Together they developed an IEP for Adil for the period of 6 months. After this time, the teachers decided to assess Adil's progress to further decide whether this initiative was successful, so he could stay at the mainstream school or should be educated in the specialized institution if it fails.

The Educational Department of Karaganda which controls participation and students' achievements in the UNT and conducts other national testing in this region, has additionally reviewed this case by school request and released Adil from passing the exam next year. However, he can still pass it after the 11th grade given that his development according to the IEP is successful. Laura's school concluded that with the positive results in Adil's specialized learning with more time they can prepare him for examination to pass it at least at the minimum level, which is important in enabling then to continue education at vocational school or college and, thus, provide better opportunities for his future.

Then, Laura decides to conduct a survey among parents to find out how many of them would be interested in sending their children to a boxing or fighting section. If the number would be sufficient she can apply for the school financial support to open such section at her school. This will help Adil and potentially other students to manage their aggressive behavior. But if there are not enough parents and students interested in this section, Laura decides to discuss the possibility of funding Adil's participation in private boxing lessons.

Another important aspect that Laura sees in this transformative process is working with school teachers on establishing the inclusive vision for the school and equipping them with knowledge on effective practices to engage all students in the learning process with them having exceptional talents, having special educational needs, being average or falling behind (Grace, 2005). To do that, she decides to invite local and international practitioners of inclusive education, namely, teachers from pilot inclusive school of Karaganda, Nazarbayev Intellectual School of Karaganda and students from Nazarbayev University Inclusive Education cohort residing in Karaganda. They are expected to exchange their knowledge and experience on design and implementation of inclusive education within this secondary school.

Laura sees herself as an action-oriented leader and believes that she in the position of the school principal can be the example of an inclusive practitioner to motivate other teachers to do the same. Even if the case of Adil will not be successful, it is still likely to start the process of change in this school, and more students with diverse needs will receive the necessary attention and the inclusion as the result.

## Teaching Notes

1. This case explores participation, as well as personal, academic and social development of the student with a cognitive developmental delay within a mainstream educational environment. The main teaching board is reluctant to change towards inclusive education and this further negatively affects students' development leaving them behind. This emphasizes the role of the principal as the example of an inclusive education leader in designing actions that ensure student participation at the individual level and work towards attainable goals in his case (Ross & Gray, 2006).
2. The need for a change of the teaching practices and avoiding norming frameworks for students is also highlighted in this case. The movement towards inclusive education is the way to ensure the successful education of all children regardless their diverse needs and abilities.
3. Judging from the context of this study, when working in accommodating special needs of students in mainstream school settings and developing inclusive environment for everyone, educational leaders should start establishing a clear and shared vision for inclusion of diverse students at their schools. Having achieved this shared vision will eliminate possible negative or reluctant views and attitudes among the people directly involved in different school processes, including teachers, administrators, school service staff, parents, students with and without special needs. Action-oriented leadership, when all principal's actions are focused on inclusive values, is a

promising approach in sharing common vision for developing inclusive school settings.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Did the school leadership make a right decision in Adil's case? What else can schools do in such cases?
2. What role do parents and caregiver play in Adil's upbringing and personal development?
3. Can the school influence the decision of family about Adil's future?
4. What is the best way to educate and develop Adil for his future success in life?
5. Should he stay at the mainstream school, or is it more effective for him to study in the special one?
6. What can Adil's family do to improve his development?

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