

THE ENGLISH SPEAKING UNION

Registered Charity No 273136

Walter Hines Page Scholarship Report

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Date of trip: October 2008.

Locations: Orlando, Florida,
Lexington, Virginia,
Pomona, New Jersey,
New York City, New York,
Louisville, Kentucky.

THANK YOUS:

I would like to take this opportunity to pass on my dearest and most sincere thanks to all those connected with the English Speaking Union who made my visit to the United States of America so wonderfully memorable and worthwhile. Particular gratitude goes to all my hosts who were, without exception, incredibly welcoming and made the short amount of time I spent with each of them interesting, thought provoking and rewarding.

ABSTRACT:

Can students with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties be successful in a mainstream education setting? And what impact does Vocational Education have on the prospects on people in education?

So often "normal" students are given endless opportunities to be successful in their education based pursuits, however, what happens to those who need a little extra help and support? What about those who need a lot of extra help? Those who maybe find tasks like reading and writing difficult? Is it actually possible for these students to be successful in mainstream education and therefore, go on to challenging and fulfilling lives?

In the UK there is support for students who need it – however, this support is not universally regulated and therefore can vary dramatically from one city to another, and even between educational institutions in the same LEA.

I suppose you could say that I have personally invested in this subject area as my younger brother has a serious head injury following a road traffic accident when he was younger and the support that he has received since has been back in education.

ORLANDO, FLORIDA.

My itinerary started on Monday, 20 October 2008 and a visit to Lake Mary High School. The school's position within Orlando resulted in the school facing a number of problems in terms of the students who attended. Particularly the educational background of the parents (normally little or no qualifications) and the language spoken (normally Spanish), meaning the students generally had low aspirations and struggled to be educated in mainstream classes. Therefore the school provided a large support network for students. Regular ESOL classes were incorporated into the timetable and subjects were taught at different levels with progression activity encouraged.

Special Education was incorporated within the mainstream school platform. Cases were from mild SEN (such as language differences) to severe SEN (such as physically or mentally disabled). The school employed specialised teachers who worked closely with the students in small classes to assist them in their lives. The students ranged from those with "normal" IQs (around 100) or those who had negligible IQs (less than 25).

Trainable students (those with mild SEN) were given jobs/roles around the college to carry out with a view of them being able to use these skills to gain employment when their education had finished. The roles included shredding office documents, to collating files, to picking orders. The school received extra funding to support this.

At Rock Lake Middle School I saw an affluent area of Orlando where well educated parents who were committed to the education of their children were the norm. There was some banding based upon ability. Students would often be placed in one of three groups:

1. Talented – this was a subject area the student did well in (compared to peers).
2. Traditional – this was a subject area the student was "normal" (compared to peers).
3. Competent – this was a subject area the student was able to perform in (compared to peers).

Students in the "talented" stream were encouraged to complete extra credit classes so to pick up additional High School modules and strengthen their college application – this encouraged articulate students to become high achievers.

Mild SEN were incorporated into mainstream classes – with one twelve year old student with non-filter Aspergers being universally accepted by his peers.

Significantly, the school recognised their role in the community as being the centre of activities and therefore supporting students after the classroom hours had ended – rather than what is the societal norm in the UK of the school closing the gates at 4pm and forgetting about their students until 8:30am the next morning. Here, there were a large number of after school activities which ranged from football to arts to extra classes – meaning that the school building could easily be used between 7:30am to 10pm, Monday to Friday.

A short visit to Winter Park Vo-Tech College was extremely eye opening. The curriculum on offer here was vocationally oriented and generally well delivered. The programmes of study took into account the ESOL provision (which 82% of the student body were either currently or had previously been enrolled in) and ensured that students were working towards real projects for real clients. This

allowed the students to have some critique from their customers as well as guidance from their tutors. Additionally, the programmes of study were structured so that they could be accessed by students throughout the year so therefore allowed for staggered enrolments – which suit the needs of the students better. Interestingly, this facility allows for students who are not of the “traditional” age to attend – they might be already working or have families, may or may not have finished their High School Diplomas. Many of the students need additional support from the college and the courses they study are structured so that students can take as long as they need to in order to complete their programme.

By allowing students the flexibility to complete their programme in a timescale which suits them personally removes the pressure that can make many students lose their way and eventually drop out of programmes. Whilst this, due to many different pressures, is more than likely not possible in UK colleges it is interesting to witness the results that such a set up allows in what is essentially a socially deprived area of Orlando.

LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA

My time in Lexington took a different slant with a greater focus on Special Needs Education. I visited Oakland School which was a middle school which specialised in the education of specific, mild learning difficulties. Students at the school were taught in ungraded classes until ninth grade meaning that the classes were mixed ages but equal on ability. The school preferred to treat students with alternative treatments (such as exercise and fresh air) rather than medication, with their grounds spanning 800 acres – only 75 acres used for buildings. Within the remaining land it has been used for alternative learning platforms such as vegetable patches, sports facilities and horse riding. The class sizes were kept purposefully small (averaging six students to one member of staff) and students were supported by plenty of one-to-one tuition. Students with the mildest learning difficulties seemed to thrive in this environment whereas those with more moderate learning difficulties also made significant progress. Such was the success of the set up that a number of students moved into mainstream education facilities after ninth grade.

My next visit was to Blue Ridge School which was an exclusive, all boys, all boarding school. As a private institution they are allowed to be selective in the students that they enrol and as a result of their policies (an entry test and essay) only a few students at the facility could be considered as having Special Educational Needs. Nevertheless, those that do have Special Education Needs are well catered for and are given plenty of support to ensure that they are able to achieve. The cost of one year’s tuition for 2007/8 was set at US\$45,000 and additional support (such as one-to-one tuition and extra classes for those with Special Educational Needs) would be invoiced to parents/guardians separately.

My visit to Virginia Military Institute (VMI) was somewhat surprising. As a state college with some military content I was not sure what to expect upon arrival, however, whilst the college has a certain, strict military feel about it (as demonstrated by the saluting of academic staff, the marching on campus and the uniforms worn by all) the support in place for students was amongst the best I have seen. Students are not expected to join the armed forces as an entry requirement, however, due to the

nature of the college and the background of many of the students around 55% of those enrolling will, at some point, do military service – some even complete this service whilst enrolled at VMI. Due to the strict and disciplined nature of VMI a large number of students who have previously been regarded as “normal” are subsequently diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (commonly known as ADHD). There is a number of support mechanisms in place within VMI for students with Special Educational Needs, however, many of the students are reluctant to access this support for fear of being identified as “weak” or “abnormal”.

It was at VMI I was introduced to something that I have been extremely keen to introduce to all my students - regardless of disability or condition - the Cornell note-taking system. Devised by Walter Pauk in the 1950s (the then education professor at Cornell University) it encourages students to divide their note-taking pages in to two columns – the note-taking (right hand side) column being twice as wide as the keyword (or left) column. The student records the key words of a lecture or text in the left column and then records details in the right. Long sentences are avoided and simple symbols or abbreviations are used instead. The notes taken should be reviewed as soon as possible after the event and the student is then encouraged to cover up the right column and answer the key questions/words which have been recorded on the left.

I have found that students, particularly the lower ability groups, have found this technique useful and results of the users have increased by - on average - two grade boundaries a student.

POMONA, NEW JERSEY

My time in New Jersey was spent visiting Richard Stockton College. This facility was a private college which has spent a great deal of time and money investing in the New Jersey state AHEAD (Association Higher Education with Disability) programme. The concept behind such a programme is to enable those with disability fair and appropriate access to the provision educational institutions offer – whether it is allowing physical access (to which Richard Stockton has invested US\$4.5 million in campus changes to allow access) or supporting students with SEN in the classroom (to which Richard Stockton estimate investing US\$300,000 each year in additional support). It was interesting to see that the Dean of Education openly talked about the student centred approach the college takes to ensure that all students are able to be successful in education – however, should a student record a Grade Point Average of 2.0 or less then they are compelled to attend Additional Support classes, should their grading not improve then they risk the threat of expulsion - which would go some way to contradicting the official college recruitment policy.

NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK

I first visited The Hewitt School, a private day study establishment where tuition would cost US\$33,000 per annum – situated in New York City’s Upper East Side it would appear that there is no shortage of parents both willing and able to pay the required fees. The school has a tradition of sending students onto some of the most famous and prestigious colleges in the United States of America yet they do not seem to get many students attending with Special Educational Needs – could this be simply because there are better institutions in New York City which cater for such conditions? It was difficult to tell, however, the school did have some students who had “mild SEN” and they used

a variety of strategies to deliver the teaching so that it meets the needs of the students. Disabled accessibility has, like in New Jersey, been addressed by a state mandate, however, private institutions (such as The Hewitt School) are not required to comply and therefore don't.

At The Hewitt School I was introduced to the work of Daniel H. Pink and his book *A Whole New Mind* and the belief that certain tasks are "left brain" and others are "right brain". It is believed that the future will be dominated by those who are able to complete tasks such as computer programming and not just those who are gifted in Maths, English and the Sciences – right brain thinkers.

My next visit was to the Academy of American Studies in Long Island City, New York. A school which particularly focused on American History alongside a varied and diverse curriculum. Opened in 1996 it was the first of forty such schools across the United States of America and supported by The Gilder Lehrman Institution of American History. There is an armed security guard present on site whenever students or teachers are at the school – representative of the area the school is in. On average only 67% of students in Long Island City will graduate from high school, at the Academy of American Studies this figure is 90%. The principal (Ellen Sherman) believes this is down to the schools strong approach to students support. They have a team of Student Guidance Counsellors who work within the school offering advice on a wide range of subject – including study skills and issues at home – and a significant focus is on ensuring students are studying at the right level for their ability.

It is the first teaching post for many of the teachers employed within the school and they are supported by a mentoring/buddy system allowing for a more experienced member of staff to offer support to the new/inexperienced member of staff. This is completed through formal meetings and team teaching in some areas. Students with SEN are mixed into groups with "normal" students so that they can offer help when needed and classroom tasks are adjusted so that the less able students are able to complete them also.

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

I visited Trinity High School which is a private, all boys Catholic High School which taught a very traditional curriculum – with the Arts taking a pivotal role. Additional support was offered to students who might need it by fourteen full time counsellors on the staff (who also teach some classes each week) and one priest (which is unusual in Kentucky). All members of the school's Senior Management Team teach at least one class a week. The school also has a large and supportive alumni (approximately 23,000 active members) who donate time and money to the school, this is also representative of the current students who are active within the school's extra curricular programme – with approximately 3,500 people attending the school's American Football matches. The school is also selective in the students that they accept and therefore, not many of the students have SEN, those that do are divided into different houses around the school with points awarded for good performance/behaviour and deducted for negative.

In complete contrast to the experience of the privately funded Trinity High School my next visit was to Fairdale High School, a former segregated school in Jefferson County. The school was one of twenty-one public high schools in the county area. It is positioned within an economically deprived area with 64% of students receiving free or reduced breakfast and lunch whilst at school. Only 7% of

student parents have any form of college education and therefore the school has tried to put together a programme which encourages students to think about their own futures. One such scheme is the "Reader's Challenge" which encourages students to complete a number of books over the course of an academic year with rewards issued upon meeting milestones:

- Five books completed = bookmark
- Ten books completed = US\$5 blockbuster card
- Fifteen books completed = T-shirt
- Twenty books completed = US\$10 McDonalds card
- Twenty-five books completed = Free book of student's choice

The additional support offered to students was based around an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) which was regularly (every lesson per subject) completed by students electronically. The teacher also highlights any concerns on a separate IEP. Once completed each IEP is monitored weekly by a member of the school's guidance team and any issues are addressed by offering support, referring the student to someone who would be able to assist further or intervention by the school's administration.

CONCLUSIONS

It would appear that the schools and colleges which appear to be most successful are the ones which actively offer support to their students and encourages student pride by encouraging them to "buy in to" the institution's ethos.

The support could be offered by onsite or external partners, however, the key to it being successful is to make it seem normal to receive advice, help and support rather than excluding students who access such guidance. In my experience within the UK it is not very often that such an approach is taken, with fears of confidentiality and such like taking precedence over what is best for the students.

It is difficult to assess whether suitable experience of diagnosing support needs was evident as I did not witness this stage of the process, however, it would be fair to assume that in most cases, this is a well managed phase in the support plans offered to students.

Additionally, I believe that with the right support and guidance of experienced staff a student with SEBD should have no credible reason why they should not ultimately be successful within their studies.