ASD and ADHD from the Teachers’ POV

I recently had the pleasure of observing my talented and dedicated son, Sean, at his job as a Special Education Teacher for 6th and 7th grade students in Denver, CO. The school is a new Charter School with about 200 mostly Hispanic children from families who are also (>90%) below the poverty level.

All of those outside forces not withstanding, the situation involves a very familiar school situation for many special students from across the nation. Sean teaches math in a pullout class of 8, and inclusion classes with more than 22 children.

The main medical diagnosis that I could ascertain for most of the Special Ed kids was ADHD, with only a few on the “Spectrum” (ASD). The major challenges that they faced were significant learning difficulties and severely disruptive behaviors. Some of the ESE students were on some type of medication, but most were not. As a result, the students, the student body and the staff had to deal with a great deal of ‘acting out’ behaviors that required attention, time and hopefully prevention strategies.

In spite of all of these requirements, what I found most interesting was the belief and work that the teachers exhibited to actually get teaching done and help the students learn to become successful adults. I was struck by the amount of time that the teachers spent coordinating their activities so that the more challenged kids moved pretty seamlessly in and out of the typical population. The teachers (and administration) were all fairly young, enthusiastic and bright young men and women who are obviously dedicated to their profession and their students. Staff, including the administration, all appeared to be on the same page about which students required what intervention(s) in order to better their educational experience, rather than simply ‘house’ them until the day was over. The teachers were hard at work in their lounge from very early in the morning until long after the children had gone home. Then, there was the homework that the teachers had to perform – lessons for the next day, calling the parents of the most troubled children and learning strategies to improve their work performance.

As I was introduced to Sean’s colleagues, they were all very interested in my view of how the school was performing. “What do you think about Alan (a particularly interesting but disruptive 11 year-old), Dr. Udell?” they would ask. “Did you have an interesting experience today?” Well, my main thoughts were, “Geez, I really didn’t appreciate the difficulties that the teachers faced.” This certainly didn’t fit the picture of my children’s elementary and middle school days in the last century. And, frankly, as part of my practice, I spend a great deal of time listening to parents complain about the school’s failure to address their particular child’s needs.

So, what I have learned is this: take the time to learn about what is really going on with your child at school, rather than merely complain that, “It’s not enough.” I think that, if you (the parent) could possibly look through a one-way mirror (or camera focused on just YOUR child) you might find it amazing that anything gets done at all. You might witness how much work it takes when even one child is unfocused and disruptive or acts out behaviorally. You might wonder how the teacher is able to re-focus the rest of the class and go on with lessons. I’m not accusing diligent parents or minimizing tired or lazy staff, just trying to help level the playing field for my wonderful son and all of the other committed teaching professionals like him.