The Evolution of Understanding: From Hypothesis to Insight

Observational Ethnography

I spent over 40 hours observing students in naturalistic settings at iLEAD Lancaster, embedding myself in classrooms during group work, watching students navigate the chaotic swirl of lunch tables, and observing those delicate in-between moments: walking into a room, attempting a greeting, deciding where to sit. These transitional spaces, I learned, were where social challenges became most acute.

Working closely with Katelyn Kaufman at Ohana Student Services, I observed twelve individual speech-language therapy sessions focused on pragmatic language skills and three small-group social skills interventions with three to four students each. I documented patterns across twenty-three classroom observations spanning morning arrival routines, collaborative learning blocks, lunch transitions, and afternoon dismissals.

I paid close attention to when teachers intervened and when they hesitated. I noticed when students shut down completely and when they surprised themselves with moments of confidence. I watched body language: the student who stood just slightly too close during conversations (documented in six separate observations), the one who avoided eye contact entirely during twelve of fourteen peer interactions, the one who laughed just a beat too late at a joke they didn't quite understand.

These observations weren't about cataloging deficits. They were about understanding the lived experience of navigating social expectations that feel invisible to most people but overwhelming to these students.

One moment stands out clearly. During a morning science collaborative at iLEAD Lancaster, I watched a student approach a group working on a project, clearly wanting to join but uncertain how to insert himself into the conversation. He stood at the edge of the table for almost a full minute, which feels like an eternity when you're the one standing there, before turning away without saying anything. The teacher didn't notice. The other students didn't notice. But I could see the weight of that failed attempt settle onto him for the rest of the class period.

That single observation told me more about the problem than any interview question could have. Students need feedback and support in real time.

Analysis: Finding Patterns in Complexity

After each interview and observation session, I spent hours digging through my findings for key quotes and insights, looking for clusters, themes, and contradictions. I color-coded by stakeholder group, by type of challenge, by potential intervention points.

Some patterns emerged quickly. Others took weeks to see clearly. I tracked emotional moments, specific fears students named, hopes parents held, and behaviors that didn't fit neatly into any single category.

What I was looking for were the deeper structures beneath the surface-level problems. Not just "students struggle with conversation," but why, when, under what conditions, and what made those struggles better or worse.

Key Findings from Students

Students were remarkably articulate about their experiences when given space to talk without judgment. They didn't use clinical language or talk about "deficits." Instead, they described their social worlds with striking honesty:

On wanting connection: "I want to know how to make friends. Like, actually make them. Not just be in the same room." (11-year-old with ASD, interviewed May 2025)

On the fear of public correction: "I wish someone could tell me what I'm doing wrong without everyone seeing. It's embarrassing when the teacher has to explain things to me in front of everyone." (14-year-old with social anxiety, interviewed April 2025)

On needing safe space to practice: "I want to practice where it's okay to mess up. Where nobody's going to laugh or think I'm weird." (9-year-old with ADHD, interviewed June 2025)

On feeling excluded from unwritten rules: "It feels like everyone else got a rulebook except me. They just know stuff I have to figure out." (13-year-old with ASD, interviewed May 2025)

These weren't complaints. They were expressions of desire: desire to participate, to connect, to feel competent. What struck me most was how self-aware these students were. They knew they struggled. They knew they sometimes said the wrong thing or stood too close or missed social cues. They weren't asking to be fixed. They were asking for tools that would help them navigate situations they found genuinely confusing.

The pattern that emerged was unmistakable: students wanted to learn. They wanted connection. They wanted to participate. But they wanted to do it privately, without being

corrected in front of peers, without being pulled out of class, and without being made to feel different. They weren't resisting support. They were resisting exposure.

Key Findings from Teachers

Special education teachers and counselors painted a picture of daily emotional labor that few people outside the field understand. They described students who froze when asked to join a group, students who didn't realize they were standing too close to classmates, students who desperately wanted to make friends but unintentionally said the wrong thing again and again, then carried the weight of that moment for the rest of the day.

One special education teacher, Mrs. Park, told me something I kept returning to: "This is the biggest pain point in my classroom. And I have nothing to give them. No real-time tools. No support that works when they're actually struggling." She went on to describe spending 2-3 hours weekly managing emotional escalations with no real-time intervention tools. During one particularly challenging week in May, she documented seventeen separate incidents where students emotionally shut down during unstructured social time.

Teachers weren't just interested in SEL tools. They were exhausted by their absence. They described wanting to help but lacking the time, resources, and systems to provide individualized support in the moments that mattered. They talked about watching students navigate social challenges and feeling helpless because intervention often meant pulling someone aside, which itself became a source of embarrassment and anxiety.

During my 23 classroom observations, I witnessed this pattern repeatedly: teachers identifying student struggles (documented in 31 separate instances) but lacking the physical bandwidth to provide immediate support. In 19 of those 31 instances, the critical moment for intervention passed before the teacher could reach the student.

What teachers needed wasn't another curriculum to implement or another assessment to administer. They needed systems that supported students directly, in real time, without adding to teacher workload. They needed visibility into patterns of struggle without requiring constant monitoring. They needed tools that worked with their existing responsibilities rather than compounding them.

Key Findings from Parents

Parents spoke about their children with a mix of deep love and quiet frustration. They described watching their kids come home from school emotionally depleted. They talked

about bedtime conversations where children recounted social failures from the day, small moments that might seem insignificant to others but loomed large in their child's mind.

What parents wanted most was consistency. They described trying multiple interventions: social skills groups, therapy, coaching, apps, books. Some helped. Most didn't. And none of them created the kind of sustained, everyday support their children needed.

One parent described her son's social skills group: "He goes every Thursday. He learns things. But by Friday, it's like none of it matters. The real world doesn't work like the group does." This parent tracked her son's social interactions over a two-week period in May. He attended his weekly social skills session but still experienced six incidents at school where he struggled to apply learned skills in spontaneous peer interactions.

Another parent, Thomas Fielder, described the painful reality: "It's very difficult to watch my son misread a peer's disinterest as enthusiasm, leading to painful rejection."

This observation captured the fundamental challenge: the gap between structured learning and messy reality. Parents wanted their children to have access to support that didn't feel like another appointment on the calendar but instead felt woven into daily life.

The Insight That Changed Everything

As I synthesized all of this data, working alongside Katelyn Kaufman throughout this research, two insights became impossible to ignore:

Students with social-emotional learning needs aren't struggling because they're uninterested or incapable. They're struggling because the support they need rarely exists in the moments that matter.

During my observations at iLEAD Lancaster, I witnessed this pattern repeatedly: students physically isolating themselves rather than risk saying the "wrong thing" (six documented instances), students standing at the periphery of group activities wanting to participate but unable to initiate (nine documented instances), and students experiencing visible distress during transitions between structured and unstructured time (documented across seventeen of twenty-three observations).

Katelyn's therapy sessions revealed the same pattern from a clinical perspective. Students demonstrated strong social skills comprehension in controlled therapeutic settings but struggled to transfer those skills to authentic peer interactions. In one particularly illustrative session, a student role-played joining a conversation with 90%

accuracy but later that same day stood frozen outside a lunch table group, unable to apply the exact same skill.

Existing interventions felt corrective, something done to kids, not with them. As Katelyn explained: "Kids don't need to be fixed. They just need tools to navigate a world that doesn't make sense to them." This became my north star.

This reframed my challenge entirely. Instead of asking "How can we provide better SEL support and tools to neurodiverse students?" I started asking:

"How might we transform social uncertainty into an opportunity for confidence-building?"

The goal wasn't simply to teach social skills in new ways. The goal was to create systems that meet students in authentic contexts, support them privately, preserve their dignity, and provide guidance in real time rather than after the fact. The ethnography didn't just inform my design process. It fundamentally shaped the direction of the solution, the principles that would guide every design decision, and my understanding of what success would actually mean for the people I was trying to serve.