

Strategies for Inclusive Classrooms

Because of the diverse student needs, I am required to be versatile in my communication style. My philosophy on communication modality is not to have one! Instead, I go forward based on where the student is when he or she enters my program. At any given time, I use an eclectic combination of anything that works—sign, voice, gestures, drawing pictures, writing, acting—whatever it takes. In addition to working with the student at his or her level, it is critical to develop a good working relationship with the family.

One of the first things that I tell classroom teachers who are going to have a student who is deaf or hard of hearing in their classroom is that most accommodations are pretty simple. They shouldn't be scared! First of all, students with a hearing loss should be given priority seating so they will have a better opportunity to hear as well as have visual access to the teacher's mouth for lipreading or see their interpreter if they use one. I also tell teachers that anytime they can make their teaching more visual they should do so. This can be accomplished by writing new vocabulary on the board or accompanying it with a picture, or by using visual schedules. The students will have a much easier time following along with these visual cues added. If the child uses sign language, one of the best ways for the teacher and student to learn is to make it a part of the lesson for all students. I worked with a kindergarten teacher last year who really embraced this concept. She often invited me into her classroom to do lessons with her class. Eventually, she and the interpreter took over the teaching. Anytime her class learned a new sight word, they paired it with the sign. She said that using this extra modality really accelerated the child's learning. A preschool teacher I worked with two years ago used sign language so much, and also encouraged her kids to sign, that a visiting parent had to ask which one of the students was deaf!

Our school music teacher is another good example of someone with whom I collaborate often. The school put on

a musical last year, and the whole student body learned to sign the songs. The parent of one of my students came to my room the next day to thank me; she was nearly in tears. She said that she never thought that she would see her child up on a stage singing and signing with everyone else, just like one of the other kids. Obviously, this kind of integration and collaboration benefits not only the student who is deaf, but everyone involved as well.

Another thing I do is to encourage teachers to be good advocates for their students. This often takes sustained determination to educate others about the child's needs. Although the many meetings and abundance of paperwork that this can require can seem overwhelming at times, the results are worth it. Teachers also need to teach the children with hearing loss to be good advocates for themselves. Fostering independence in students with disabilities is a component that is sometimes overlooked. In order for them to have a quality life within their educational setting, and also outside of school, students need to know how to request an interpreter, manage their audiological equipment, and educate people about their hearing loss.

The reality is that hearing loss is a low-incidence disability. In my experiences in rural settings, both in Kansas and in Alaska, I have seen how isolating it can be for the student to be the only one who is deaf or hard of hearing, or one of few, in his or her school. Therefore, it is especially important to me that I do everything I can to make sure the students I work with are included as much as possible. By being flexible and adaptable both in my teaching and in my communication style; by collaborating with staff, students, and parents; and by being a good advocate for my students and encouraging them to be good advocates for themselves, I find that my students are very successful in an inclusive setting.

—Catherine Davis

Teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
Liberty View Elementary School, Overland Park, Kansas