



Making Inclusion Work

During the spring of my senior year as an undergraduate student in elementary education, I was required to complete a twenty-four-hour practicum for a special education course. The site I chose was the North Dakota School for the Blind. After my experiences at the school, I

realized that I was very interested in working with children who were blind and visually impaired. This led me to search for graduate programs in the field of blindness. I was fortunate enough to locate the vision program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. From my first day in the program, I had the opportunity to work with children of varying degrees of visual impairment, as well as additional disabilities. After completing my master's degree, I worked as an itinerant teacher for the visually impaired in southwestern Iowa for four years and went on to become the state consultant for children with deaf-blindness. I then returned to graduate school and earned my doctorate at Iowa State University.

Inclusive Education Experience

Working with children with visual impairments and multiple disabilities is definitely challenging, yet very rewarding. This is especially true when working with general education teachers in inclusive settings. You have to have a starting point that everyone can agree upon, including acceptance of the child with special needs as a full member of the general education class and an understanding that the general education teacher is that child's full-time teacher—not the five other service providers who also work with the child once a week. If the IEP

team can come to such an agreement, then everything else seems to fall into place. For example, it may be that a teacher of the visually impaired works with the general education teacher to adapt lessons by creating tactile materials or story boxes, or even works with the entire class by teaching a class lesson.

One of my more memorable teaching experiences was collaborating with a first-year teacher who was working with a kindergartener, Andrew, who had multiple disabilities, including deaf-blindness. I taught a cooking lesson to the class once a month, in order to model interacting with Andrew for the other children and adults in the classroom. This worked well for the kindergarten teacher because it incorporated math, reading, and social skills. It was a wonderful opportunity, however, for the other children to see that Andrew could be an active and important member of the class, as they worked in small groups to get to know Andrew. By the end of the school year, the children were able to tell the adults what Andrew liked and disliked. The students also knew how to interact with Andrew so that he could respond to them with facial expressions and vocalizations.

Overall, as a teacher of the visually impaired, being able to work with the kindergarten class took extra time and preparation on my part. However, classrooms today are changing, as are the instructional expectations of both general education and special education teachers. It takes teamwork and collaboration to make programs work for children with special needs and to give them the best possible start to being active and contributing members of their community.

—Susan A. Brennan, PhD

Former teacher of students with visual impairments
Deafblind Consultant and Project Coordinator at Iowa Educational
Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired