

Making Inclusion Work

My training in the field of special education began many years ago in South America where it was common practice to teach children with disabilities in self-contained classrooms. After I transferred to the United States and earned a degree in special education, the range of possibilities for educating children with disabilities was a welcomed change. Starting out as a resource room teacher and eventually becoming an inclusion specialist has been an interesting and rewarding educational experience.

Inclusive Education Experience

Evolving into an inclusion teacher from a resource room teacher has definitely been an interesting journey. In the beginning it was challenging, although I welcomed the opportunity to serve my students in their least restrictive environment. It was difficult, however, for some general education teachers. This was especially true of the veteran teachers who did not understand the purpose of having students with disabilities in their classroom as well as having another educator in “their room.” When the time came to implement the accommodations stated in the students’ IEPs, some teachers had difficulty understanding the need for the accommodations. A few made comments relating to the fact that the children should be able to do the work if they were being served in the regular classroom, while others alluded to the fairness to the other children. Working through this process was trying at times. This was especially true when working with students with learning disabilities—mainly because their disability is not readily obvious. Often, general educators could not figure out why these children were not performing like the rest of the class. Many times these children were labeled lazy, or they were simply misunderstood. It took the general education teachers some time to appreciate the benefits of inclusion for *all* students in the class. It took some convincing and collaboratively working with them on a daily basis to make it successful.

Through the years I have seen tremendous changes toward the acceptance of children with disabilities. General educators have become more knowledgeable about pupils with disabilities thanks, in part, to working collaboratively with special educators. Working together as a team has proven to be the most productive and effective way to teach students with special needs.

Strategies for Inclusive Classrooms

The support of the school administration is the backbone of any solid inclusion program. It takes a great deal of time to effectively plan for students in an inclusive class. I would say this is one of the most important aspects of an inclusion model. It is crucial that the general education teacher has time to meet and plan with the special education teacher. It is important to communicate openly about students’ needs. It is necessary to evaluate the

effectiveness of the various instructional strategies used in the classroom and to be sure that the needs of all learners are being met. It is vitally important that related service providers, paraprofessionals, and other individuals working with these students be informed of their progress or the problems that sometimes arise.

Successful Collaboration

Successful collaboration entails a wide variety of options. In my opinion, one of the most important things that special educators can do is to earn the trust of the teacher(s) they work with on a daily basis. When there is trust in the relationship, collaboration will naturally fall into place. It is important that the special educator and general education teacher share responsibilities for all students. Together they plan and implement strategies that will benefit not only students with IEPs, but all children in the class. Each teacher brings his or her own strengths, skills, and knowledge to the classroom in an effort to serve all students. It is important that if problems ever develop, both the special educator and the general education teacher support each other and work together in problem solving.

Working With Parents and Families

Parent and family involvement is crucial. Parents’ input during the development of the IEP is extremely important since they work with the child on a daily basis outside of school. It is necessary that they share their concerns with the team in order to better serve their son or daughter. Parents need to become “educators” and help their child continue the learning process at home. Additionally, it is important that parents communicate openly with their child’s teachers and provide feedback. Together parents and school personnel can provide an effective inclusive environment that meets the unique needs of the child.

Advice for Making Inclusion and Collaboration Work

Making inclusion and collaboration work entails a wide array of strategies. It is not an easy task and takes hours of planning to successfully implement, but the results are worth it. Yet, even when school personnel and parents have their hearts in the right place, difficulties may arise that make the process extremely frustrating. This is when all concerned need to focus on the common goal of what is best for the child. Administrative support, teachers working together for the good of all children, and active parent involvement often result in a successful inclusive environment benefiting all students.

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