

Making Inclusion Work

One of the benefits of spending many years in special education has been the opportunity to vicariously ride the swinging pendulum regarding the inclusion of students with special needs. As a teacher, counselor, and coordinator, all in the field of special education, I have seen and experienced the continuum of inclusion from the worst of times to what I consider the beginning of the best of times. What a great opportunity we have to grant each and every student the right to success they so desperately desire and deserve.

My very first job was teaching students with emotional or behavioral disorders attending a separate special education school. Fourteen students, eleven boys and three girls, were brought by bus to our county school and somewhat thrown together in a self-contained classroom. The students' ages ranged from 14 through 21, and although they were diagnosed as having emotional or behavioral disorders, their disabilities and needs varied greatly. As a first-year teacher, survival was my objective, not teaching anyone to read or divide. Unfortunately, it was a terrifying, difficult year. As a teacher, I did not have the training or support needed to properly meet the needs of the students in my classroom. Students already typically deficient in social skills and academics were given scant opportunity for practice or success. In addition, there were virtually no positive peer role models within the classroom. I was discouraged because I knew we were letting these students down by separating them from the rest of the children. Needless to say, progress was minimal.

Fast-forward several years. I thankfully work in a society with an educational and legal system that now recognizes the benefits and need for inclusion of all students. It is a pleasure and honor to work with students and teachers preparing the way for meaningful inclusion of students. Not only do I get to work as a counselor and behavior interventionist with many students who have special needs, but I also teach at the university level, training preservice general education and special education teachers. Whether I am in a public school or university classroom, I seize the occasion to champion the benefits of inclusion for students and teachers alike.

A predominant concern teachers have shared with me over the years is that they are willing to welcome most children with special needs into their classrooms if they are told how to include the students and what to do! The exception, however, is usually students with emotional or behavioral disorders. The majority of these students want to be in a safe environment, and they crave structure, consistency, and predictability. An attitude geared

toward welcoming any student into a safe learning environment is half of the formula for successful inclusion. Students will know if they are welcome in your classroom. They will likely feel welcomed and safe if you are clear about your expectations, are consistent, and are well prepared. Avoid assuming the worst and that students "can't." Assume they "can" with careful planning and preparation. Say what you mean and always mean what you say—follow through.

Preparation is so very important and may include modification of the curriculum, teaching styles, and classroom management procedures and practices. Does this mean you must change everything you do for one student? Absolutely not. It does mean that having students with special needs in your classroom should give you cause to reflect on your personal teaching style, strategies, tolerance levels, expectations, procedures, and behavior management style. Reflection on your practices as a teacher will shed light on your readiness to include all students, and you will be well on your way to making preparations for students with special needs.

Although this may all sound a bit overwhelming, the best news is that you are not alone. Collaboration may very well be the biggest key to successful inclusion. You will have access to a host of wisdom, knowledge, and experience from the professionals with whom you work. Take advantage. Be proactive with teachers and parents and learn as much about each student as possible. Access the special educators in your building and seek their knowledge regarding the special needs of your students. You may need to take the first step and ask for help. The special educator in your building may be hesitant as well, for fear of stepping on your turf. It is also important to establish your own relationship with the parents and well worth the effort to do so before the need arises to discuss a problem. Time spent getting to know each student personally is possibly the best investment. Once you know what interests a student, meaningful engagement in academics is more likely, and building of relationships will be easier. Collaborating and preplanning for the arrival of a student with special needs may mean the difference between success and failure for everyone.

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