Clearing the Hurdles of Inclusion

One teacher shares her experiences with three special education students and offers suggestions to help other teachers plan for and implement inclusion.

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Many general education teachers are frightened by the prospect of including students with disabilities in the general classroom because they have no formal training in dealing with the challenges that these students face. Yes, inclusion can be a frightening endeavor. Nevertheless, for me, a 1st grade teacher of 29 years, inclusion has provided some of the best experiences of my career.

What Inclusion Is—and Isn’t

Underlying inclusion is the premise that students should be educated with their peers in the least-restrictive environment for as much of the day as possible. In many cases, this environment is the general education classroom for at least part of the day. The intent, however, is not to drop the student in general education without providing needed support. The individualized education program (IEP) should note and make available everything the student needs to make this placement successful—including support, services, and the time recommended for each support and service. For example, a student may require the aid of a teaching assistant in the classroom for at least part of the day.

Inclusion does not mean that the student cannot be taken from the room for instruction if the IEP team deems it necessary. If it is not in the best interest of all students in the classroom for the special education student to remain there, the team can and should make changes in the student’s placement.

There is not one recipe for the inclusion of special education students. Because inclusion is individualized, it will look different for every student.

A Step Toward Inclusion

Neither my undergraduate training nor my staff development courses prepared me for teaching in an inclusive classroom. My life changed five years ago when my principal attended one of our 1st grade team meetings to tell us about two girls who were fully included in one of our kindergarten classrooms; she told us that she hoped to fully include them into 1st grade the following year. She then asked for a volunteer to work with the students.

After volunteering, I spent the rest of that year and summer attending workshops, reading, meeting the girls’ parents, sitting in on weekly kindergarten team meetings, and visiting the students in their classroom so that I could get to know them. Because one of the girls used a wheelchair, the IEP team and I also looked at my classroom to see which adaptations we would need to make for her. In addition, a full-time teacher associate was assigned to my room to help.
The First Year

By the start of the next school year I had begun to wonder what I had gotten myself into. I was convinced that I didn’t know enough. What would I do if faced with a problem? How could I possibly teach these students how to read? What if I couldn’t even communicate with them?

Kim

Kim had multiple disabilities resulting from low muscle tone. She could use her hands, but small motor activities were difficult for her. She often used a wheelchair, although she also got around well by crawling. In fact, the IEP team and I had already decided that we would leave her wheelchair in the hall and allow her to crawl around the classroom. She came to the classroom that year able to make about seven utterances that represented words. She could not use sign language effectively because of poor hand control; however, she was able to point and had her own versions of some signs to communicate her needs. Her academic performance was well below grade level, but it was difficult to determine how much she really understood because she could not communicate her cognitive abilities easily.

From the first day of school, I saw how determined and stubborn Kim was and how much she desired to learn and to be like everyone else. She had a bench that was easier for her to climb on and that provided more stability than a chair. She didn’t want to sit on the bench, however, and, when given the choice, would choose a chair like those her classmates used. Her occupational therapist and I decided to provide her with an adapted classroom chair; she sat in it happily for the rest of the year, and we removed the bench from the classroom.

It took me a month to understand some of her signs. It was frustrating for both of us when Kim pointed and screamed to request something, and I had no idea what she was trying to convey. I felt helpless, but she never gave up on me. Fortunately, her teacher associate, who had been with her for two years, also helped me understand her.

Kim put me in my place several times throughout our year together. For example, I falsely assumed early in the year that Kim would not be able to complete an alphabet recognition assessment with the other children. In fact, I was wrong about her abilities. I learned that Kim was as capable of learning as my other students and that I could demonstrate my respect by holding higher expectations for her. I decided that her curriculum ought to look like that of any other 1st grader until it became clear that she required a particular adaptation.

As the year progressed, Kim began to read emergent-level books and expanded her vocabulary to include a few more words. She even learned to form short sentences. Every day we read an ABC book together containing words that she could articulate. One day while reading, she pointed to the word baby—a word she knew well—but repeated the word Deon instead. I discovered that she had just learned how to say her brother’s name the night before and wanted to share the new word with me—and I was deeply touched.

I longed for Kim to succeed in writing as well as speaking. We struggled together, but writing with a pencil continued to be difficult for her. It was painful to concede defeat and admit that she was not going to be able to use a pencil to write. Eventually, we accepted the setback and turned our attention to the keyboard instead. With time, Kim successfully used the computer for writing activities.

Sara

Sara had fetal alcohol syndrome. She had a short attention span and found it difficult to remember information. She needed adult help to remain focused and to accomplish a task. In addition, she perseverated—that is, she repeated what others said and did (picking up inappropriate words from other children on the playground and repeating them endlessly in the classroom, for example) and didn’t understand that sometimes her speech and behavior were inappropriate. Nevertheless, she was able to care for herself most of the time without assistance.

Sara was a happy child who usually got along with others, yet often got lost in the crowd. She rarely spoke unless I initiated a conversation, and even then
her responses were brief. She was content to exist on the periphery of the class, quietly observing, for about the first month of school. She was afraid to walk down the hall by herself and always took my hand as I walked her to the outside door. She relied on a classroom friend to walk with her to recess. Gradually, she overcame that fear and one day took off down the hall by herself with a great big smile.

Sara's academic performance was well below grade level; her cognitive development was delayed by two to three years. Although she loved to be read to, Sara had difficulty reading. She struggled to remember vocabulary words from day to day. I could see the frustration in her eyes when she couldn't recall a word that she had known the day before. She would make progress for a while and then plateau for a week or more. She required much reinforcement and review. We had to spend several days on each book, but she too learned to read emergent-level books by the end of the year.

Her writing skills also took some time to develop. She progressed slowly from filling a page with straight lines to eventually writing a few readable sentences. I will always remember the day that I helped Sara write her first "book." Yes, it was simple—one sentence to a page and only four pages long—but the words flowed from page to page. She was thrilled to be able to read her "book" to several other teachers.

Sara's and Kim's classmates accepted and supported them. The other students included the girls in everything we did. It was heartwarming to see the students respond to the girls' individual needs. Someone would hold a chair steady so that Kim could get on it. When they worked in small groups, teammates managed to find suitable jobs for Kim and Sara. The girls weren't the only ones who benefited from their inclusion in the classroom; the other students in my classroom that year learned acceptance, tolerance, and the meaning of community. I learned that I didn't have to shoulder the whole responsibility for the girls' inclusion experience because a team of professionals stood ready and eager to assist helping him develop social skills. Rob's need for routine frightened me because no two days are ever exactly alike in a developmentally appropriate primary classroom like mine. Initially, I made a pictorial schedule for Rob, and that was enough for him on most days. He often feared new people, objects, and experiences, so I had to introduce them carefully. Once I understood his anxiety, I tried to prepare him for novelty as much as possible. For example, we found that breaking a new task into smaller parts made it easier for Rob to accept it and feel successful.

Rob would often refuse to try new or difficult tasks. For example, one day we were reading a story; Rob was reading well until he came to a page full of text. He stopped and said that he couldn't go on. I agreed to read part of the section if he would read part of it. He tried the next page by himself, and when he finished the story, he turned to me with a big smile on his face and said, "I am a really good reader, aren't I?"

Rob had difficulty interacting positively with peers. He had a hard time sharing and playing fairly; he would often get mad and stomp off, shout at other students, or hit them. With time, training, and practice using appropriate social behaviors, Rob made tremendous improvements and learned to control his temper most of the time. He sought friendships. It was rewarding for me to see him go to recess arm in arm with a classmate, something that probably would not have happened in a pullout program. His parents were proud and amazed; they had not dreamed he could accomplish as much as he did.

Suggestions for Successful Inclusion

My own experience has taught me that even a teacher with no special education experience can make inclusion work. There are no magic formulas for success—simply using good teacher sense is the best advice that I can offer.
I approach all my students with the same high expectations, believing that just because a student has an individualized education program does not mean that he or she cannot learn. Following are suggestions for teachers faced with an inclusive classroom environment.

**The Planning Stage**
- Meet the student and his or her family and learn about his or her disabilities as early as possible.
- Attend team meetings regarding the student before the placement to gain insight into the student’s abilities and the accommodations that need to be made.
- Attend individualized education program meetings.
- Resolve physical accessibility problems during the summer.
- Schedule a meeting at the end of the preceding year with the classroom and special education teachers to discuss the student’s progress.

**The Implementation Stage**
- Discover and emphasize what the student can do.
- Be patient and take time to build a trusting relationship with the student.
- Rely on your instincts as a professional educator to make curriculum decisions that concern the student.
- Accept that you will make mistakes. We all make them, and we can learn from them.
- Begin early to build a classroom community. Treat every student as a worthy member of that community.
- Involve parents in the student’s education; update them regularly on the student’s progress. Listen to their hopes and dreams for the student, which are primarily that their child will fit in and make friends.
- Schedule regular team meetings for all those who work with the student.
- Start with the least-restrictive classroom environment possible and make accommodations as needs arise.
- Give the student the same opportunities that other students have. He or she should get to be the special helper, reader or author of the day, and so on. Make accommodations when necessary to include the student and make him or her feel special.
- Treat the student fairly, but avoid favoritism. In most cases, the student’s disability does not warrant special treatment. For example, he or she should have to take turns just as everyone else does.
- Be involved in the individualized education program development process because the program mandates the level of support that the student receives; teacher input is crucial.

**Lessons Learned**
When inclusion comes your way, you have two options: You can complain and convince yourself that you will have a bad year, or you can embrace inclusion and learn something new. After four terrific years of teaching in an inclusive environment, I feel confident that I am a better teacher now.

*All names have been changed.*

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