Inclusion

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Introduction

As a practicing teacher "inclusion" is more than a philosophy, it's a reality. Sometimes it's a fail safe to insure that a child remains in the least restrictive environment, and other times it's an IEP requirement that doesn't quite fit the needs of a child. On any given day eating lunch in the teacher's lounge, you can listen to any number of heated debates over inclusion. There are compelling arguments for both sides.

But that's not all, parents are becoming more educated about the inclusion mold. It is not uncommon for parents, even those who have only heard the word in passing, to demand inclusion for their child at PPT meetings. Sadly enough, some of those same parents argue that other children "shouldn't be in the same class" with their children.

On a side note, while all the adults decide what is best for these children, they are the ones with littlest amount of input. Though all the research and articles I read, and the teachers and parents I spoke with doing this paper had the children's best interests in mind, none of them included the children's opinion. The

children with disabilities I interviewed where I teach had mixed feelings.

Inclusion is a Good Thing.

The inclusion models have well intentioned goals. Inclusion aims to promote social interaction, self esteem, and higher expectations for all children in an environment that represents the world they live in.

It doesn't take a dozen intensive research articles to realize that people notice differences between themselves and others. That being said, why would people notice differences if differences didn't effect how they interact with other people? As teachers we have a responsibility to model and guide children in interacting with one another. We cannot expect non-disabled children to develop positive social interactions with disabled peers if the disabled peers are never around and vice versa. One could argue that it is our friendships that help us appreciate the differences that make this world beautiful. There is rarely a time when the teachers I work with are all silent in the hallway, even though they tell the children to be. But I can

guarantee that when children with and without disabilities demonstrate their symbiotic relationships, you could hear a pin drop.

Many parents and educators fear that children will be stigmatized by segregation. Again, it doesn't take a team of sociologists to enlighten us about the negative effects of segregation; racism, sexism, ageism, and the list continues on. As human civilization evolves, it becomes more and more heterogeneously mixed. If school is to prepare children for the real world, should it not become more and more heterogeneously structured?

I can't imagine any educator that would argue where another educator's heart was who backed inclusion. There are many that will argue where the substance is.

Good Things Don't Always Work Out.

Jay Heubert (1994) suggests that there are several points on which proponents and opponents of inclusion agree. There is a general consensus that, with appropriate staff development and support, more students with mild disabilities could be served in regular classrooms. It is also generally believed that better research, improved coordination of services between special and regular

education, and administrative support are crucial for serving students with disabilities.

In my handful of service years teaching, I have come to realize that many great ideas are wrongfully discredited by inappropriate implementation. It's not the children who succeed within the inclusion mold that we remember as much as the disservice to those who did not. After reading the previous paragraph, I reflected back on my negative experiences with inclusion.

For example, though it can be very frustrating to try and teach the concept of letter sounds to early kindergarteners while a child with disabilities melts down, it's impossible to hold it against the child. Where did my dissatisfaction come from? In one particular instance, the child's mother told the special education administrator that she was feeding the child things that she thought might set the child off to see if the teachers noticed. When you're trying strategy after strategy and the only consistent response is that the child reacts inconsistently to intervention, you look to support from your administration that isn't always there.

In many instances, communications between special education resources and the regular classroom teachers are not well developed. In one incident, a speech therapist "trained" one of my teaching assistants to be a one-to-one with a child with disabilities in my room while I was out sick. Ironically, the communication board she made for the child was inaccurate and inappropriate. The teaching assistant she chose to "train" was a temporary placement in our room.

As all too often happens in teaching, the pendulum swings entirely to one side. Inclusion is not a good thing for everyone. Cohen (1994) is maintains that inclusion can be inappropriate, especially for those with significant hearing impairments. In yet another situation in my school, (and I don't mean to pick on my school because no school is perfect, it's just what I have experienced first hand) there is a girl who cannot speak. She communicates with a handful of sign language approximations at approximately a 4 year old developmental level. It quickly becomes quite clear that she cannot effectively communicate with her double digit aged peers, nor

academically succeed at their level. I haven't seen her smile at school since she visited the pre-k room earlier this year.

Sometimes all the good intentions you can muster won't get voters to approve money for teacher development or administrators to back you. The real world doesn't always wind up being fair.

Effects of Inclusion on Curriculum.

Whether you're a proponent or an opponent to inclusion, if you're a public school teacher then you will be working within the framework of inclusion, or not working at all.

Laws like No Child Left Behind are pushing for universal academic progress. Whether educators would like to admit it or not, government funding drives curriculum. Those funds are hinged upon results from various tests like the Connecticut Mastery Test, so curriculums are being amended accordingly.

On the other hand, educators are seeking a curriculum of social awareness and acceptance. In a time where news is readily available and often painful, educators seek to shape a utopian world community. That is not to say that educators don't attempt to infuse this social consciousness with academics.

What I hear my colleagues saying is that they're being asked to teach more material to a more diversely skilled group of children with limited support and what seem like unattainable expectations. Most of us educators will not give up. But what can we realistically do?

Strategies for Effective Inclusion.

Two techniques that make the most sense to me are flexible grouping and Essential Questions. These strategies were not exclusive to inclusionary classrooms. All students in any classroom, in any grade can benefit from flexible grouping and Essential Questions. I think that's important when designing curriculum as us kindergarten and preschool teachers seem to be left out of the curriculum loop.

Many teachers know that organizing and planning for flexible grouping can be a bit of work. It involves more than changing seating arrangements. Flexible grouping involves making decisions as what grouping, heterogeneous, homogenous, individualized, or whole group, children in a class will best learn in. A teacher needs to know their children well. They need to assess regularly and modify groupings accordingly for each skill set.

The Coalition of Essential Schools formed the idea of Essential Questions (Sizer, 1992). Among an Essential Question's many characteristics are: there is no one right answer, the questions are intended to help students become investigators, the questions involve thinking- not just answering, and the questions imply that all students can answer them. Maybe it's because I have always practiced asking open-ended questions that this idea seems so straight forward I should have thought of it myself. In examining the questions I ask on a daily basis I have discovered that many questions I ask cannot be answered by everyone in the class. While I have presented children with questions like, "What makes a person healthy?", I could be eliciting more thought and dialogue by first asking, "What makes you feel good?" This question creates a personal investment for all children to explore and assess what makes them healthy.

Conclusion.

Whether you're a proponent or opponent of inclusion, it is a reality in public schools. The same effective teaching strategies that work in inclusion classrooms work in regular education classrooms.

Teachers need to research and be proactive in their curriculum. With effective communication and support from administration, teachers can shape curriculum, by using Essential Questions and flexible grouping. not just for kids who are included, but for all children to succeed in learning.

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