ENABLING TEACHERS WITH INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

Gordon George

Teacher at:The Indian School, Al Mabela,Sultanate of Oman.

Abstract

Inclusive classrooms might contain several students with special needs who re mainstreamed full time into the general classroom, or one or two students who spend time each day in both a special education classroom and a general classroom. Either way, your role as a general education teacher is to create a community conducive to helping all students meet academic and behavioral goals; however, you should not have to achieve this aim alone. Ongoing communication is essential for locating individuals, services and materials to best support all of your students. In addition, some key planning and teaching strategies can make a dramatic difference in reaching students with diverse abilities and skill bases.Inclusive education does away with the practice of segregating students with learning and/or physical challenges from the rest of the student body. While the practice of inclusion places extra demands on students and facility logistics, there are numerous benefits to all students, both disabled and non-disabled.Teachers in inclusive classrooms must incorporate a variety of teaching methods in order to best reach students of varying learning abilities. This has benefits even for those students who would be placed in a traditional classroom, as this increases their engagement in the learning process. Even gifted and accelerated learners benefit from an environment that stresses responsiveness from all students.Perhaps most importantly, inclusive classrooms encourage open and frank dialogue about differences as well as a respect for those with different abilities, cultural backgrounds and needs.Despite the benefits, there still are many barriers to the implementation of inclusive education. A UNESCO article, "Inclusive Education," outlined many of them, including:

Attitudes: Societal norms often are the biggest barrier to inclusion. Old attitudes die hard, and many still resist the accommodation of students with disabilities and learning issues, as well as those from minority cultures. Prejudices against those with differences can lead to discrimination, which inhibits the educational process. The challenges of inclusive education might be blamed on the students' challenges instead of the shortcomings of the educational system.

Curriculum: A rigid curriculum that does not allow for experimentation or the use of different teaching methods can be an enormous barrier to inclusion. Study plans that don't

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recognize different styles of learning hinder the school experience for all students, even those not traditionally recognized as having physical or mental challenges.

Teachers: Teachers who are not trained or who are unwilling or unenthusiastic about working with differently-abled students are a drawback to successful inclusion. Training often falls short of real effectiveness, and instructors already straining under large workloads may resent the added duties of coming up with different approaches for the same lessons.

In their research, Semmel and his colleagues (1991) listed many issues and concerns that cause negative attitudes toward inclusion by general educators. They include:

(a) Teachers do not see improvement in achievement levels for general students or students with disabilities as a result of inclusion.

(b) More emphasis is being placed on higher achievement scores by students which dampens enthusiasm for inclusion.

(c) Some teachers believe that placement of students in general education rooms could negatively affect the distribution of instructional classroom time.

(d) Teachers feel that the rate at which district curriculum objectives are met may be decreased as a result of inclusion students.

(e) Teachers contend that the general class program is inadequate for addressing the instructional needs of students with disabilities.

(f) Teachers believe that including students with disabilities will not result in positive social benefits for the students.

These issues and concerns show that some teachers view inclusion as an undesirable means of service delivery. Proponents of an inclusive model face a struggle in trying to change mind sets and attitudes to help them see the positive benefits of inclusion.

Staff Collaboration/Communication Concerns

Special educators need to work with general classroom teachers in order for changes to begin. Together, they have a shared responsibility for educating students with mild disabilities. The research shows that this collaboration and sharing does not take place as it should. In a recent study, Schumm& Vaughn (1995) learned that even though general classroom teachers value the resources that special educators can provide, like help in planning and making adaptations for student learning, these human resources are limited. These researchers suggested that students in inclusion situations, particularly at the middle and high school levels, cannot expect a high degree of collaboration and coordination between their special education and classroom teachers. Similarly, Downing, Simpson, & Myles (1990) found that communication between general and special educators is a key factor in the success of

inclusion. The results of their study indicated that without communication between general and special educators, a student may appear to have adequate skills in the special education room, but be deficit in specific skills crucial to the inclusive environment. Lack of appropriate communication and collaboration could result in negative academic and social effects for students with mild disabilities. Even though inclusion should be a team effort, the research shows that general classroom teachers assume the primary responsibility for students with mild disabilities who are placed in their classes (Semmel et al., 1991)

Together, regular and special educators must together maintain ownership and a responsibility in educating students with disabilities in order for successful inclusion to begin and/or continue.

Teacher Preparedness Concerns

Another concern of general educators is that they feel unprepared to make modifications and implement adaptations for effective inclusion. One research study stated that successful inclusion must begin with the application of individualized programs, use of structured routines, and implementation of special education methods (Downing et al., 1990).

Frustration begins when teachers are unsure as to how to effectively implement specialized strategies and still meet the academic needs of all the other students in their classroom (Schumm& Vaughn, 1995). Many general education teachers are actively and willingly involved in inclusion

Purpose

We are interested in finding out what support, modification, and training is needed to motivate general education teachers to be more willing to include students with mild disabilities in their classrooms. The purpose of our efforts is to survey one district's elementary general and special education teachers and administrators to identify the barriers to implementing inclusion practices.

Language and communication: Many students are expected to learn while being taught in a language that is new and in some cases unfamiliar to them. This is obviously a significant barrier to successful learning. Too often, these students face discrimination and low expectations.

Suggestions and recommendations: Backward planning is the most straightforward way to ensure that you align daily lessons and units with your year-end goals. This is a multi-step process:

1. Consult the records of your students who receive special education services, particularly their individualized education programs (IEPs), to determine overarching behavioural and academic goals.

2. Figure out how these goals intersect with national and state standards and other year-end goals for all of the students in your classroom.

3. Review your curriculum to figure out which units will help you meet which year-end goals.

4. Map out individual lessons within the units that align with these goals.

5. Formulate a to-do list of people and services to contact so you that can schedule support when necessary. For example, if you plan to have students complete a cross-curricular research project, you need to know when you will schedule a visit to the school or public library so that you can ask a parent or aide to support students with special needs.

6. Adjust lessons to ensure that they accommodate the needs and abilities of your students, including those in special education programs.

One of the keys in contemporary education is universal design. This approach makes your curriculum accessible to all students, regardless of their backgrounds, learning styles and abilities. There are several ways for you to accomplish this feat:

• Relay content in diverse ways (visually, verbally, written).

• Ask students to share what they are learning in diverse ways (speaking, illustrating, writing).

• Utilize multiple materials to engage students (software, art, theatre, video, object lessons).

These approaches ensure that you reach all of your students with special needs, as well as deepen their thinking and reinforce new information so it moves from short-term memory to long-term memory.

Universal design shares much with Howard Gardener's Theory of Multiple Intelligence which outlines students' varied approaches for processing information (known as "intelligences") and how teachers can access these pathways. For example, in an inclusive classroom, a unit in the core curriculum, such as one on the solar system, might feature vocabulary and abstract concepts that are challenging for students with disabilities to master. A general education teacher can make these concepts more comprehensible by employing various strategies and leading hands-on activities such as:

- Showing videos about the solar system.
- Making models of the planets.
- Interviewing an astronaut.
- Visiting a science museum or planetarium with an astronomy display and program.
- Looking at books with images of the solar system.
- Making up songs, poems, rhymes and chants about the cosmos.
- Drawing or painting images of stars, meteors, galaxies and planets.
- Acting out a scene of astronauts in flight.

Utilizing techniques that are suited to multiple intelligences "allows students to explore important concepts using a range of domains, and find information based on their own abilities."

However, integrating some basic, daily strategies can make a profound difference in your students. Consider the classroom tasks in which you and your students regularly engage and how you could make these tasks accessible and valuable to your special education students. For instance:

- Organizing school supplies, art materials, learning centres and the classroom library teaches valuable life skills while making all students feel part of the classroom community.
- Creating backdrops and decorations for the bulletin board and other classroom displays teaches responsibility while enhancing students' spatial and visual intelligences.
- Being in charge of homework collection, attendance charts, computer equipment or record-keeping teaches organizational skills.

Incorporating life skills training into your curriculum is not a one-time proposition. To effectively impart these skills, you will need to model the required tasks and reinforce them on a regular basis.

Allow volunteers, teacher's aides, service providers and the special education teacher gives you valuable opportunities to engage in collaborative teaching.

In "**Interactive Teaching**: Two or more teachers shift roles between leading whole-class instruction, observing instruction and monitoring learning.

1. **Alternative Teaching**: One teacher leads small-group instruction while the other teacher works with the rest of the class. This model works particularly well if a small group requires reinforcement or re-teaching to master a concept.

2. **Parallel Teaching**: Two or more teachers lead small, mixed-ability groups of students in the same lesson. This approach functions well when teachers require a high level of focus and participation from students.

3. **Station Teaching**: Two or more teachers lead or observe small groups of students as these groups rotate through several learning stations. This technique helps students stay on task as they complete shorter activities and transition clearly from task to task.

Effective planning and teaching in an inclusive classroom depends upon having control of your classroom.

With many students, those with special needs and otherwise, a rigid behaviour management plan will not serve you in every circumstance. For example, if you have a student who has a shorter attention span due to developmental issues, it is unfair to expect that student to stay focused on seatwork for as long as students with longer attention spans. No amount of punishment or reward can extend that student's focus.

Instead, tailor your classroom environment to better suit diverse students' needs. With students' and specialists' input, create a checklist or action plan for students. It can list, with short phrases, symbols or cut-outs, how to review work, put away supplies and find an independent task to do, such as writing in a journal, drawing in a sketchpad or reading a book from the classroom library.

Among the other behaviour management strategies that support effective inclusion are:

- Posting a schedule and sticking to it.
- Displaying classroom rules.
- Diversifying instruction.
- Encouraging peer instruction and leadership.
- Using signals to quiet down, start working and put away materials.
- Giving students folders, labels and containers to organize supplies.
- Checking in with students while they work.
- Speaking to students privately about any concerns.
- Employing specific, targeted positive reinforcement when a student meets a behavioural or academic goal.

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