

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Hospitality in an Inclusive Classroom

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This issue of **NASET's Practical Teacher** was written by Ernest Solar, Ph.D. from Mount St. Mary's University. The Individuals with Disabilities Act requires public schools to provide students with disabilities with a free and appropriate education with their nondisabled peers whenever possible. Inclusion equates to accessibility of the general education curriculum with non-disabled peers; however, inclusion does not equate to hospitality in the classroom. Hospitality is the intentional act of promoting a learning environment where students with disabilities feel as if they are a part of the classroom community. This practitioner article defines the importance of inclusive education for students with disabilities, explores the difficulties in implementing an inclusive classroom because of judicial judgments and social acceptance, presents the importance of hospitality in an inclusive classroom, and outlines four principles a teacher can intentionally implement to foster hospitality and acceptance of students with a disability within an inclusive classroom.

Abstract

The Individuals with Disabilities Act requires public schools to provide students with disabilities with a free and appropriate education with their nondisabled peers whenever possible. Inclusion equates to accessibility of the general education curriculum with non-disabled peers; however, inclusion does not equate to hospitality in the classroom. Hospitality is the intentional act of promoting a learning environment where students with disabilities feel as if they are a part of the classroom community. This practitioner article defines the importance of inclusive education for students with disabilities, explores the difficulties in implementing an inclusive classroom because of judicial judgments and social acceptance, presents the importance of hospitality in an inclusive classroom, and outlines four principles a teacher can intentionally implement to foster hospitality and acceptance of students with a disability within an inclusive classroom.

Introduction

As a common practice, a student identified to receive special education services is placed in an inclusive classroom to be educated with his or her nondisabled peers. However, a student with a disability often does not feel welcome in an inclusive setting because of the lack of hospitality by the teacher and students. The lack of hospitality may impact the student's ability to reach his or her maximum learning potential. By law, according to the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2004 (IDEA), public schools systems are required to provide students who receive special education services an opportunity to be educated with their nondisabled peers (34 C.F.R. § 300.39, 2006; La Salle, Roach, & McGrath, 2013), meaning students with a disability should have every opportunity to receive the Local Education Agency (LEA) approved curriculum in a general education setting. Therefore, receiving support through an Individualized Education Program (IEP), as developed by a special education teacher with the help from key team members; such as a general education teacher, school administrator, parent, and any other school personnel, that could contribute to the success of the child in the general education classroom. The IEP is then implemented by the general education teacher with support from the special education teacher and key team members (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2014). In short, through the requirement of federal law through IDEA, schools are mandated to provide accessibility to the student, who receives special education services in a general education setting.

Accessibility equates to inclusion. Meaning a student with a disability is educated in the general education classroom with his or her non-disabled peers regardless of his or her ability to function independently in the classroom. This decision was upheld in the *Oberti v. Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon School District* (1992) when it was ruled that "inclusion is a right, not a special privilege for a select few". Therefore, the school district is responsible for ensuring that a student with a disability participates in meaningful and purposeful grade level appropriate instruction while in an inclusive classroom (La Salle et al., 2013). Even though IDEA mandates school districts to provide grade-level appropriate instruction to a student with a disability in a general education classroom, the student's disability may provide challenges for his or her meaningful involvement in the inclusive classroom setting (Browder, Wakeman, & Flowers, 2006).

In general, special education teachers are responsible for developing an IEP for a student with a disability through the collaboration of a multidisciplinary team. It is the general education teacher's responsibility to implement accommodations and help monitor the progress of the annual goals of the IEP within the general education or inclusive classroom. The special education teacher is a resource for the general education teacher in implementing accommodations for students with a disability in the general education setting. However, there is a lack of parity between general and special education teachers that impedes the effectiveness of the inclusive setting (Keefe, Moore, & Duff, 2004). In many cases the general education teacher lacks the expertise of a special education teacher when it comes to modifying, adapting, and incorporating classroom instruction and activities for students with disabilities into the general education classroom environment (Anderson, 2006). By ignoring, intentionally or unintentionally, a student's disability, teachers negatively impact a student with a disability's functional and academic performance. "Promoting physical, social-emotional, behavioral, and academic development of student should be a concern of both special and general educators" (Anderson, 2006, p. 53).

Anderson (2006) argues that the creation of special schools and classes for students who receive special education services has enabled general education teachers to renounce responsibility toward individuals with disabilities. He further expands on the idea that using terms, such as *mainstreaming* and *inclusion*, draws attention to those individuals with disabilities as being separate from the norm, therefore, creating a negative attitude and perpetuating the *us* and *them* mentality often seen in school classrooms. Even though by law, schools are required to include students with disabilities in the general education classroom, it does not mean that the general education teacher has to help the student become an integral part of the classroom environment. Saliers (1998) argues that an attitude toward inclusive settings in the classroom for students with a disability necessitates moral maturity in creating a place (classroom) of belonging for all students regardless of ability. Anderson (2006) argues that the goal of inclusivity is to incorporate all students with a disability into the dynamics of the classroom.

Based on survey results published in 2003, Praisner reported that only one in five elementary school principals have positive attitudes towards inclusion. Pivik, McComas, and LaFlamme (2002) reported attitudinal barriers related to facilitating inclusive practices by the parents of students with a disability as failing to adapt the curriculum, being excluded from class, and lacking appreciation for the student's capabilities regardless of his or her disability.

The fear is that many teachers continue to believe that education is a privilege to be received by conforming to society's norm of behavior (Anderson, 2006), which leads to the idea of uniformity in the classroom by providing the same services to all students regardless of a disability in an attempt to be fair and inclusive. When in reality, if a student with an IEP receives the accommodation of reduced answer choices on a multiple choice test and the teacher provides that accommodation to all students, regardless of a disability, they are therefore not providing the required accommodation for the student who needs it to be successful. As Anderson (2006) points out, promoting uniformity through "everyone gets the same thing" (p. 46) removes the concept that "everyone gets what they need" (p. 46). In regards to the example, a majority of the students in the class do not need reduced choices on a multiple choice test; just the student with a disability requires that need. Therefore, uniformity does not promote inclusion, but signals to the child with special needs that his or her disability is devalued in the eyes of the teacher, which may lead to a sense of not being welcome in the classroom. When a teacher acknowledges the accommodations and modifications of a student with a disability, he or she is demonstrating to all students in the classroom that the diverse learning styles of each individual student as equally important and valued.

In many cases disabilities are viewed from a perspective of inaccurate information, negative past experiences associated with a disabling condition, and fear based on being confronted by the fragility of life (Pirner, 2015), which leads to an action of excluding persons with a disability. In the classroom, students mirror a teacher's actions and reactions. In order to promote acceptance of students with a disability into an inclusive classroom, teachers need to be the role-model in promoting acceptance through his or her own actions. A goal of all teachers should be to actively try to remove any stigma or alienation a student with special needs experiences due to his or her disability. The act of hospitality in the classroom is an intentional practice by the teacher to convey a perspective (Anderson, 2011) and acceptance of the student with a disability through the lens of a loving heart. The teacher should show that even if the disability may limit the functional or cognitive behavior of the student, this is only one part of the individual and not the whole person. Therefore, a teacher should demonstrate through his or her own actions that the student with a disability has his or her own strengths, dreams, interests, hobbies, and views of the world.

Reynolds (2008) states, "there is nothing inherently wrong with [a] disability or with people who have disabilities" (p. 187). What is potentially wrong is the environment in which students with disabilities are being educated. For a student with a disability, mere accessibility to a general education classroom does not mean a sense of hospitality within the classroom. Instead, hospitality means that students who receive special education services should be able to expect an inclusive classroom to be a safe and supportive environment, where they feel empowered to learn from a teacher who is accepting of everyone. This article provides a framework for new and seasoned teachers in creating a classroom environment where all students, regardless of disability, experience a welcoming and hospitable learning environment.

Influence of Court Decisions

In June of 1982 the U.S. Supreme Court, through the court case of the *Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson Central School District V. Rowley*, ruled that special instruction and supportive services provided through the concept of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to students who receive special education services is not required to help them achieve their full potential as learners. Justice Rehnquist ruled that "a 'free appropriate public education' consists of educational instruction specially designed to meet the unique needs of the handicapped child, supported by such services as are necessary to permit the child 'to benefit from instruction.'" This court ruling has been translated to mean that schools are not required by IDEA to help a student who receives special education services to achieve their maximum potential, but only offer a floor of opportunity for the student to be educated with his or her non-disabled peers. The problem with this interpretation of the court ruling is that it is being indirectly communicated to students with disabilities that they are not worthy of the school system's effort to be allowed to reach their maximum potential.

Due to a variety of reasons, dependent on the disability as defined by IDEA, students with disabilities are often several grade levels behind their non-disabled peers. Some of these issues include: developmental delays, hospitalizations, school disciplinary actions, or simply not being emotionally available to learn at the same pace as their non-disabled peers. Therefore, providing students with disabilities a significant amount of additional educational services through one-on-one and small group instruction, extended school year services, and the like to try to reach their maximum potential in the classroom should be an inherent effort by all Local Education Agencies. However, students with disabilities often only receive the *floor* of special education services due to monetary and personnel constraints through the Local Education Agency (e.g. local school districts). This is also an affront to students with disabilities that they are not monetarily worth the effort to be allowed to reach their maximum potential. While shortchanging students with disabilities, LEAs promote and encourage

Advance Placement (AP) classes for every student and school athletic programs in order to promote the image of the LEA. Such mistreatment sends a message to students with disabilities and their families that their dignity, or self-worth, is not as important as that of students without a disability. Sadly for students with disabilities to receive the chance to reach their maximum potential, parents have to pay for private tutoring and related services and hope that their efforts translate to success in the classroom.

Changing the thinking of school policy makers to allow students with a disability to receive special education services to have the potential to reach their maximum ability in the classroom would take a paradigm shift in the importance and view of special education services. However, an individual classroom teacher can effect change in his or her own classroom by promoting the dignity of all students in the classroom. Reynolds maintains that human dignity is not defined by one's ability to "reason" or to meet societal standards of "productivity" and "independence" (2008, p. 186). Instead, a person shows that he or she has human dignity through "giving and receiving love" (2008, p. 187), which is exactly the action any teacher, regardless of grade level, should extend to every student in his or her classroom. Teachers, general and special education, should have a basic understanding that all students have the right to experience equal dignity regardless of a disability. Special needs are qualities that do not diminish the worth of the individual who has them. However, society has constructed the idea of "disability" as a weakness that diminishes someone's value. Teacher training programs should cultivate a community of teacher leaders who understand the importance of eliminating the damaging societal viewpoint of a "disability" that is prevalent in public school systems.

Disbanding the Cult of Normalcy

As described by Reynolds (2008) "the social systems in which we participate are often disabling, marking out body capital according to a cult of normalcy that distinguishes ability from disability" (p. 188). In 2005, Kauffman echoed similar thoughts when he described that it is often difficult to determine a disability because the actions displayed by groups of individuals are outside the social context and cultural rules as determined intolerable by a society's chosen authority. Arguably, society's chosen authority is the school teacher. For example, if a child with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), who has not been identified to receive special education services, lies on the floor of the classroom but is still paying attention to the lesson, are his or her actions considered intolerable? For most teachers and school administrators, the answer would be "yes", which results in the child being referred to a committee to determine if his or her actions require special education intervention. This, in turn, sends a message to other teachers and parents that lying on the floor in a classroom setting is intolerable to society's cultural rules. When in reality, is it actually intolerable for a student to lie on the floor of the classroom? Arguments could be made that the action is disruptive, disrespectful, defiant, or inappropriate. But who made that determination? Teachers before us have done so. A majority of teachers before us have determined that acceptable cultural behavior is for students to sit in chairs in rows facing the front of the classroom. Personal past experiences from good and bad teachers influence teaching styles and classroom expectations of teachers.

With the struggle of incorporating students with disabilities into general education classrooms through a federal mandate, many teachers have overlooked the importance of providing a hospitable and safe environment for all students. In many ways, inclusion has become a checkbox for school systems to mark off to satisfy a federal requirement. Prior to inclusion, many schools attempted to mainstream students with disabilities into general education classrooms, such as art, music, and physical education (Bryant, Bryant, & Smith, 2017). With mainstreaming, students with disabilities were required to demonstrate the appropriate skills to independently perform in the general education classroom (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2014). If students with a disability earned the privilege to be in a general education class through mainstreaming, but regressed and could no longer independently participate, they would be removed from the general education classroom, therefore, potentially influencing future general education teachers to obtain incorrect assumptions of students with a disability. Through inclusion, the assumption is that students with a disability and their nondisabled peers would both benefit to be in the general education classroom (Heward, 2013; Taylor, 2004). However, many general education teachers resist inclusion and unintentionally create an inhospitable environment due to a "your kids/my kids" mentality, fear of successfully meeting annual yearly progress as outlined by the LEA, and the inability to modify or adapt instruction for diverse learners (Anderson, 2011).

Promoting Inclusivity

Anderson (2011) outlines several actions a teacher could take to promote hospitality and acceptance in the classroom for students with a disability. The teacher would a) dispel any ignorance related to the disability through research and education, b) foster a collaborative relationship with all service providers (e.g., special education teacher, therapists, school administrators, and paraprofessionals) and the family, and c) demonstrate zero-tolerance for any language or behavior that would isolate a student with a disability (e.g., bullying, teasing, or ridicule). In an effort to promote a physically and psychologically safe classroom for all students, the teacher would create lessons that encourage social and academic interaction between the student with disabilities and his or her non-disabled peer to foster a learning environment that is actively inclusive.

Pirner (2015) proposes the removal of the idea of a person being disabled. Instead, a person with disabilities would be simply “one of the many forms of human life” (pg. 233), similar to a person who is artistically inclined or a person who is only able to draw stick-figures. This supports Reynolds (2008) belief that “there is nothing inherently wrong with [a] disability or with the people who have disabilities” (p. 187). Society is engaged in a system that differentiates between ability and disability of individuals. In many ways these thoughts are similar to Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 2006). A person without a spatial intelligence is not considered disabled. On the contrary, a person who is considered to have spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, or naturalist intelligence is often viewed as gifted with a special intelligence. The act of removing the term “disabled” may further promote the acceptance of students with differences by demonstrating that all students have strengths and weaknesses regardless if they are visible or not. Pirner (2015) argues that “weaknesses and deficits can be seen as chances that can support the talented-development of others and can contribute to the social cohesion of the community” (p. 236). In essence, when the teacher successfully creates a hospitable inclusive learning environment for all students, regardless of a disability or not, he or she is actively engaged in the social ethics of participative justice that establishes “the right for all to take part in and be part of the community” (Pirner, 2015, p. 232).

Intentional practice

Creating a hospitable inclusive classroom environment is an intentional practice by the classroom teacher. Anderson (2011) suggests four principles a teacher can incorporate into his or her teaching philosophy to create an environment that fosters the dignity and acceptance of students with a disability in the classroom. The four principles are 1) protection, 2) educational support, 3) empowerment, and 4) personal commitment.

The first principle in creating a hospitable classroom for students with a disability is to provide protection through structures that are put in place to “ensure the safety of students, promote positive behavior, and ensure the flow of classroom activities” (Murray & Pianta, 2007, p. 108). A safe classroom space is one in which “students are able to openly express their individuality,” and one which provides “protection from psychological, emotional, or physical harm” (Holley & Steiner, 2005, p. 50). By creating a structured environment, the teacher is building a safe place for the students within the larger school environment to allow them to be themselves (Solar, 2011). Murray and Pianta support this belief that “such settings allow students to develop a sense of trust and comfort with all members of the classroom community” (p. 108). Holley and Steiner (2005) reported that students expressed “they were more challenged in terms of personal growth and awareness in classrooms that feel safe” (p. 58). The classroom is an extension of the teacher, and if the room is safe then the students will feel empowered by the teacher to risk being open and honest in that environment (Solar, 2011).

The second principle is providing educational support to students with a disability. This means making necessary accommodations to promote learning (Anderson, 2011). The teacher should strive to ensure that students with disabilities are “engaged in meaningful and intentional grade appropriate instructional content” (La Salle, et al., 2013, p. 136) at all times. Therefore, teachers should faithfully implement all IEP accommodations and modifications outlined for each student to provide him or her with the best opportunity to learn and master the curriculum content being taught.

The third principle is the empowerment of all students to participate as fully as possible in all classroom activities (Anderson, 2011). A study by Roach, Chilungu, La Salle, Talapatra, and Vignieri (2009) revealed that students with disabilities have limited opportunities to engage in activities with their peers. To increase the number of opportunities for students with a disability to engage in activities with their peers, the teacher must promote hospitality as an intentional practice, which should be emulated by the students in the classroom.

When the teacher purposefully includes students with a disability into academic and social learning situations, students will follow the teacher's lead and in time include the student with their own actions. Through the teacher's intentional effort of including students with a disability, they are breaking down the barriers of segregation and teaching by example the importance of accepting everyone.

The fourth principle is the teacher's personal commitment to unconditionally accept all students in the classroom (Anderson, 2011). Anderson presents the idea that a truly inclusive classroom means removing any negativity toward a student with a disability by replacing myths, rumors, and inaccurate information about a disability with accurate information to break down the barrier of fear in an effort to get to know a person who is disabled. When the teacher actively engages to learn and understand about a disability he or she is intentionally changing his or her perspective about the disability and the capabilities of the student who is disabled, which in turn, by example will influence the actions of the students in the classroom.

Kunc (1992) positively summarizes the potential outcome of intentionally incorporating the act of hospitality and acceptance of students with a disability through the act of inclusion by stating:

When inclusive education is fully embraced, we abandon the idea that children will have to become "normal" in order to contribute to the world. Instead, we search for and nourish the gifts that are inherent in all people. We begin to look beyond typical ways of becoming valued members of the community, and in doing so, begin to realize the achievable goal of providing all children with an authentic sense of belonging. (p. 38-39).

Conclusion

The American public education institution as a whole continues to function from a perspective of scarcity (Anderson, 2003). Even though the reauthorization of PL 142-92, into IDEA 1997 and 2004 attempted to shift the thinking of providing special education services from a strength-based model, students with disabilities are often viewed as problematic and in competition for limited resources within school systems (Anderson, 2003), which supports the perspective of scarcity, in that time and money are limited when it comes to providing services for students with disabilities. This notion is even supported by the court decision of *Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley* (1982) when it was determined that a school system is not required to provide the best services for a student with a disability, but must provide the minimum. However at the same time the 1992 *Greer v. Rome City School District* ruling that a student with a disability should not be denied access to the general education curriculum because of the added cost to the school district is overlooked.

In contrast, special education should be viewed as the act of healing (Anderson, 2003). Educators should be viewing students with disabilities from a perspective that all students, regardless of a disability, have unique gifts and talents and should be provided with equal amounts of respect. With each student being provided equal amounts of respect, he or she would be provided the necessary time, resources, and money needed to work toward an education which promotes each individual to flourish regardless of a disability. Only then will students with a disability be educated in a classroom where inclusivity and hospitality are provided in equal measure through a heart full of love and respect by the teacher.

Teachers in the classroom set the mood, attitude, and level of acceptance in the learning environment by their actions. Students of all ages often emulate a teacher's actions and beliefs that are set in the classroom. In many ways teachers are the unspoken authority for society to determine what is acceptable and tolerable in the learning environment. Therefore, all teachers, general education and special education, should be taught how to teach with compassion and acceptance in their heart for all students. Through a lens of compassion and acceptance, the teacher can then promote hospitality in the classroom by modeling how the students should treat their peers, which in turn would raise the level of acceptance of differences in the classroom that is often lacking due to the negative image of disabilities.

Anderson says that "true hospitality is not pity or charity but an openness and sharing with one another" (2011, p. 22). All humans are vulnerable beings open to the possibility of love and acceptance (Reynolds, 2008), which leads to the possibility of generating true hospitality for the acceptance and love of everyone regardless of differences. A good teacher will instruct his or her students based on emotions infused within his or her own heart. Meaning, if a teacher leads a classroom with a heart full of love and acceptance his or her words and actions will positively influence each student and create a hospitable classroom for everyone. If a teacher's heart is embedded with prejudice and differences, then the students will be influenced by thoughts and actions that generate separation.

A classroom is hospitable when relationships and diversity between students who are disabled and nondisabled are consciously nurtured by a teacher with a heart full of love and acceptance (Anderson, 2011). All students deserve an education in a comfortable and safe environment to learn with a compassionate teacher willing to put forth an effort of creating a sense of normalcy so every student feels equal.

Inclusive education should not simply be a task fulfilled by schools and educators, but a concept that is based on the view that human beings, regardless of a disability, complement each other in the human community (Pirner, 2015). Therefore, “negative attitudes toward disabilities ... must be removed” (Anderson, 2006, pg. 49) to erase the intended or unintended ignorance toward individuals with disabilities. When this occurs, schools and teachers can move towards a norm, where all students are accepted in the classroom without designation and will receive the services that each student needs regardless of ability or disability. In closing, Reynolds (2008) states it best that people are not perfect, but must depend upon the welcome hospitality provided by others to flourish. As teachers, it is our responsibility to create a sense of family and community within the walls of the classroom, creating a welcoming environment where all members of the classroom, regardless of a disability, are equal members of the classroom.

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