

# Inclusion: Administrative Headache or Opportunity?

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*An inclusionary program was established in four secondary schools in a southeastern community. Components of the program include initial staff development, technical assistance, information sharing, scheduling, instructional strategies, and support. To ensure successful inclusion, collaboration among all participants is essential. Program results are discussed.*

The concept of providing students with disabilities the least restrictive educational environment possible is a relatively new one. In 1975, Public Law 94-142 provided financial assistance to the states for improved educational services for students with disabilities. In response to this legislation, school administrators began to try to ‘mainstream’ students with disabilities into the regular classroom while general education teachers struggled to adapt. With the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997, additional emphasis was placed on providing students with disabilities greater access to the general education curriculum and including those students in more general education classes. Some teachers and administrators were dissatisfied with the increased emphasis on access to the general curriculum for all students. The rules for IDEA issued in 1999 left even more educators confused and disgruntled. The problem may be that many educators view the inclusionary process as a headache rather than as an opportunity, in part because many principals and teachers may not be sufficiently familiar with quality inclusionary procedures.

For the last three years a group of general and special educators, operating under an IDEA discretionary grant, has worked with four secondary schools on the issue of inclusion: a high school in a rural community, a suburban high school, a middle school in a small town, and an urban middle school. The results of these efforts may provide insight to others seeking to establish a quality inclusionary program.

## Initial Staff Development

Prior to initiating inclusion, significant staff development was needed. Many teachers, and some administrators, misunderstood the concept. Teachers were

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concerned about discipline issues and about students with disabilities possibly “holding back” a class. Several points were made in the initial inservice:

- Not all students with disabilities will or should be included, though the vast majority will be.
- There are many types of disabilities, and students with learning disabilities, mild mental retardation, behavior disorders, hearing or visual impairments, and some forms of physical disabilities are capable of earning a high school diploma. However, many students may need more than the traditional four years to complete requirements.
- Even if a student is not capable of earning a diploma, he will still learn more through access to the general curriculum, and the inclusion experience may also provide the student with social benefits.
- Discipline for students with disabilities must follow prescribed procedures, but no law or policy requires that any disruptive student, with or without a disability, must remain in a class.
- Accommodations with respect to instructional and assessment strategies do not compromise course standards. Students with disabilities must achieve the same minimum standards as students without disabilities to receive credit for a course.
- In a true inclusionary setting, the special educator and general educator work as a team to help all children learn more effectively.
- General educators have a right to know the nature of a student’s disabilities, the strengths and weaknesses of the student, and what accommodations may be necessary in terms of instruction and assessment. It is the responsibility of special educators to share that information and collaborate with general educators to meet students’ needs.
- General educators have a right to serve on the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team and should help make decisions about students’ placement, instructional objectives, and recommendations for accommodations.

## **Technical Assistance**

Staff development workshops are appropriate for introducing topics, but not for creating and sustaining change. Research has demonstrated that change does not come easily, even when the need is compelling (Thomas, Correa, and Morsink 1995). For change to take place, all of the stakeholders have to buy in to the process. This buy-in does not come overnight, and does not come without some degree of pain. In our case, members of the university faculty who served on the intervention team provided technical assistance. Although the four schools the team worked with had the advantage of university faculty members to provide help, this is not a necessary condition so long as the school has professional resources to provide the same type of assis-

tance. These professionals, both general and special educators, performed the following roles:

- Visited schools on a regular basis to maintain contact with special educators and subject area teachers.
- Suggested ways to approach instructional, assessment, and behavior problems that may exist in a class containing both general education students and included students.
- Assisted in the development of IEPs or behavior plans for specific students.
- Observed classes for the purpose of diagnosing potential problems and suggesting strategies to solve the problems.
- Offered organizational suggestions to the administrative staff of each school that might improve the inclusionary process. The suggestions were school-level specific and based on the observations over a one- to three-year period.

Requests for technical assistance were sporadic, putting specific suggestions into place remained a challenge, resistance to change was powerful, and both university and school faculty felt overwhelmed at times. The team's frustration led to exploration of new approaches. Initially, general and special educators were invited to participate in focus groups, during which they were encouraged to share concerns and to be proactive in planning for the inclusion of students with disabilities. Through focus groups, the team found that general education teachers frequently did not know who the included students were and did not understand the students' needs. Special educators and general educators did not communicate effectively, and there was little collaboration among the teachers. To overcome these difficulties, the team scheduled regular meetings involving all teachers of a specific student. The team was able to allocate funds that allowed them to release teachers by employing substitutes—a luxury that some schools may not be able to afford. The general recommendations that emerged from this activity and that can be implemented in most schools include the following:

- Before the first day of class, during a designated preparatory workshop, have the special and general educators confer for the purposes of identifying each shared student and explaining what the student may or may not do and what the general educators may or may not written expect.
- Establish both a verbal and be able to system for sharing information about students on a continual basis.
- Because most students with special needs will be included in the general education classroom, organize schedules so that special educators

- may consult with general educators, share teaching responsibilities, and provide technical assistance in a collaborative way on a regular basis.
- Provide coaching or staff development on strategies such as cueing, team teaching, group work, and other techniques that enhance instruction in the general classroom setting.
  - Provide regular administrative support for inclusion, emphasizing that teachers should hold all students to high academic and behavioral standards.

## **Information Sharing**

Questions often arise as to how general and special education teachers should share information and what information is appropriate to share. During the conference prior to the start of the year, each general education teacher needs to be informed about the nature of the disability of each student who will be included. At this time, the general and special education teachers discuss details such as seating arrangements, preferred grouping patterns, study aids, and special materials (e.g., calculators or organizers). In addition, the teachers should agree upon necessary accommodations such as time extensions, manipulatives, and preferred learning modalities during this initial meeting. When students have a behavior plan, that too needs to be explained. Finally, the new role of the special educator needs to be clarified.

Once classes start, information on ongoing academic performance, social interaction, and self-control needs to be shared on a regular basis. Ideally, schedules should permit regular conversations among the teachers. In a less ideal but more realistic world, forms can be developed that the general educator completes to alert the special educator to problems or concerns relative to each student. The team works with schools that use such forms on a weekly basis, just to maintain an ongoing dialogue about student progress. Other schools have elected to use such forms only when needed.

Both resource teachers and teachers of students who still spend most of their time in a more restrictive, self-contained environment need to participate in the shared information experience. The team has observed schools in which self-contained students are included in one or two classes, but not for the entire day. In those cases the general educator was not informed of the inclusion and the nature of the disability, which resulted in considerable frustration. If a student is included for only one class, then the sharing must still take place.

## **Scheduling to Ensure Balance**

Scheduling was, from the beginning, a significant concern. At times students with disabilities were placed only with teachers who were willing to accept

them, so that some classrooms had disproportionate numbers of special education students. One school even requested a special workshop to reemphasize that inclusion was everyone's responsibility and that a balance of teaching loads was critical to the program's success.

The composition of a class should reflect the composition of the school. If 12 percent of a school's population has special needs, then a maximum of 12 percent of each class roster should consist of students with special needs. To be certain, this cannot be the case all of the time. It is, for example, not likely that a school will reach that level of inclusion in chemistry, foreign languages, trigonometry, etc. However, the appropriate proportion can be maintained in the core classes such as history and English. Failure to try and maintain a balance leads to faculty morale problems. If one section of a course has 50 percent special needs students while another section has none, the general educator teaching the inclusive course will likely experience burnout as well as feelings of animosity toward the teacher who has no students with disabilities in class.

Those involved in scheduling the inclusive school should also ensure that special educators are available to work collaboratively with general educators. If an inclusive school previously had five special educators with their own self-contained classes, it may be possible to enlist three of those teachers all day long so they can work with teachers and provide assistance. This also provides more time for teachers to meet with parents—an important consideration, because the expertise of all concerned professionals and the interests of parents are the basis for placement and other educational decisions. The goal is not to reduce the number of special educators but to change the way in which they function. It may not be possible to completely change a special educator's assignment; however, it should at least be possible to provide him or her with more than one preparation period and to ensure that the prep period is scheduled concurrently with the prep periods of at least one or two of the general educators who have students for whom the special educator is responsible. One of the middle schools in the project was able to provide common planning periods by grade level so that all sixth grade teachers and the special educator for sixth grade could plan together. This was ideal, but not necessarily realistic in large secondary schools.

## **Instructional Strategies**

The team heard quite often that general educators did not want a special educator to come to their room and observe what was happening. This situation arose from an apparent misunderstanding of appropriate roles. A special educator should work with the general educator. Both teachers work with the entire class, not just different segments of the class. The special educator may conduct some class sessions and the general educator others.

During periods of student group work, both teachers should work with all of the students. This creates a collaborative relationship and deemphasizes the special learning needs of the special education students in the eyes of their classmates.

Administrators need to encourage flexibility in instructional strategies and class structure within the team teaching environment. All students benefit from methods and approaches that address a wide range of learning styles. Using the learning modalities of Dunn and Dunn (1992), classes should address the tactile and kinesthetic learner as well as the auditory and visual learners. Similarly, all four of Gregorc's (1985) styles (i.e., abstract sequential, concrete sequential, abstract random, and concrete random) should be found in all classroom settings. Using a variety of approaches ensures that critical thinking and problem-solving skills can be achieved to some degree by all students, including students with special needs.

Encouragement to use some small group instruction should also be provided. Although strongly independent students may not benefit from group work, most students do. Because groups can be as small as two for peer tutoring or larger for guided practice or project groups, teachers need to make use of a variety of group settings. Cooperative learning in the formal sense involves working toward a grade, whereas group work in general does not need to be graded. When formal cooperative learning is used, it can benefit students with disabilities. One cooperative learning model, called foreign exchange (Rieck and Lee 1996; Rieck and Wadsworth 1999), is especially useful in the inclusive classroom. The approach combines a form of jigsaw (Aaronson et al. 1975) with the concept of reciprocal teaching to produce a dynamic social and academic interaction to improve learning.

## **Group Meetings and Administrative Support**

Another ingredient for success in the inclusionary process is the continuation of focus groups throughout the academic year. Within the teaming and collaborative process there is also a need for guidance on effective communication among the stakeholders. For example, understanding group rules for focus groups, the role of listening, how to ask questions in a nonthreatening manner, and how to engage in reflection and provide feedback (Briggs 1997) are all necessary skills that the administrator must foster for the regular meeting of focus groups to be successful. At least once each marking period, time should be provided for the special educator and general educators of each student to confer as a group. This activity is a supplement to the individual contacts that teachers may have. The group meeting provides everyone the opportunity to share experiences and to collaboratively draw conclusions about a student. It is particularly important that the group meeting take place before the IEP meeting. The presence of other professionals acting as

resource people may facilitate and enhance the productivity of these focus group meetings, especially just prior to writing a new IEP.

General educators are legally part of the IEP team and should be encouraged to participate in the IEP meeting. Teachers who have had experience with a particular student have important contributions to make in determining proper placement and accommodations for the following year. Although some teachers may elect not to participate in these IEP meetings, the fact that there were group meetings and that they were invited to participate will increase the level of involvement and sense of participation in the decision-making process. Group meetings can also serve to reinforce the concept that access to the general curriculum does not dilute the quality of the general education program but provides students with special needs the opportunity to learn within the program.

## Summary

The inclusion of students with disabilities is a matter of law. Although some may view it as an administrative headache, it is also an opportunity—an opportunity to provide a higher level of learning to those students while also increasing socialization with students without disabilities. To accomplish inclusion, collaboration among all stakeholders is essential. Administrative support is paramount, and time must be provided for true cooperative planning and discussion. Education is a team effort, and nowhere is this more evident than in the successful implementation of an inclusion program. 🌱

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