

The Inclusive Classroom

Tammy Webster

Abstract

In today's classrooms, inclusion is evident on many levels. Educators are given opportunities for professional development on creating inclusive classrooms that respect and embrace diversity, and they are gaining confidence in their ability to apply differentiated instruction that engages all students in their learning. Using differentiated instruction helps learners to become confident in their abilities and comfortable in their learning environment. Not only are educators being provided with opportunities to see the benefits of inclusion, parents are also being educated on the importance of inclusion and how it benefits their children, with or without a disability.

As members of an educational team, teachers require education and training on the importance of creating an inclusive classroom. It is essential to acknowledge the benefits that inclusive classrooms have on students with and without disabilities. Creating an inclusive classroom means not just putting students with disabilities into the classroom, but also finding ways to help all students benefit without exclusion. In inclusive education, regular and special needs learners are together in the same classroom (Ekeh & Oladayo, 2012, p. 2). Creating an inclusive classroom setting requires strategies and techniques that meet the needs of all students, not just those with disabilities. Inclusive classroom environments respect diversity and, while doing so, they create a warm and welcoming environment. Providing teachers with appropriate education encourages them to use inclusive strategies that support diverse learners. Teachers in inclusive classrooms practise differentiated instruction to engage students in their learning and accommodate their needs. Inclusive classrooms have a clear direction to help their students and work as a team with the parents, educating the parents about inclusion.

Environment That Respects Diversity

Inclusive classrooms are warm and welcoming environments that create and respect diversity. Inclusion of all learners in the classroom is most beneficial in the areas of academic achievement and social interaction (Lampert, 2012, p. 1). Including students with disabilities in the regular classroom can be successful only when those students feel that they are truly part of the classroom. Students feel like they are part of the classroom when they have support and feel socially successful with their peers (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2013, p. 9). Leading open conversations about differences, backgrounds, and abilities is crucial in developing student confidence and comfort in the classroom environment.

It is important that students with special education needs be in the regular classroom. Having these students in the regular classroom creates diversity, since all students enjoy a much higher level of social acceptance (Cawley, 2002, p. 430). In an environment that respects diversity, the teachers recognize that diversity refers to all children and their diverse personalities and learning needs, not only children with exceptionalities (Katz, 2012, p. 5). Being mindful of the variety of backgrounds, values, and beliefs that students bring to school will help the teacher to provide quality education for all students in the regular classroom.

Inclusion Education for Teachers

Teachers who are educated with inclusion produce and create diverse learners. When the teachers are confident in what diversity and inclusion truly mean, their confidence spreads among the children, creating a welcoming environment that respects all areas of diversity. Inclusion happens not simply with student participation; inclusion means that the regular

classroom teacher takes ownership of the whole class (Bennett, 2009, p. 2). Having the proper education helps teachers take ownership of every student. Education on the topic of inclusion enables teachers to produce and create diverse learners in an inclusive classroom.

Teachers need to be on board on all aspects of inclusion to create diversity. Otherwise, the technique often falls short of desired change, or teachers become overwhelmed. Many teachers have discovered that the application of one piece of inclusive practice rarely has the desired effect (Katz, 2012, p. 22). Providing the teachers with adequate resources and staff training leads to an understanding of all pieces of inclusive practice (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2013, p. 9). When teachers learn to become confident about inclusion, they create an environment that respects diversity and naturally includes all students.

The inclusion method of teaching challenges teachers to think about how their students learn as individuals and as a class. Using inclusion methods gives the teacher the opportunity to learn more about how inclusion benefits the students by seeing them all engaged and motivated to learn. With teachers facing the challenge of meeting all of their learner needs, it is extremely beneficial that teachers pursue professional development on inclusive education. Providing the teachers with opportunities to gain new knowledge about inclusion opens new doors to student success in the classroom. Confidence and a clear understanding of inclusion lead to an inclusive classroom, which enables the teacher to apply appropriate strategies and techniques. With strong education on the topic of inclusion, teachers will learn to embrace the diversity in their classrooms, not only students with disabilities, but students with a variety of ethnic backgrounds and values, creating inclusion across the classroom.

Support for Inclusion in the Classroom

Providing students with academic support is essential in creating an inclusive classroom. Since classroom environments have the ability either to improve or impede a student's ability to learn, it is key to provide the students with academic support that will enhance their learning (Bucholz & Sheffler, 2009). In today's classroom of high standards and tests, providing the needed supports is more important than ever. Without this support, students become afraid and fall short of the expected standards and test scores. However, offering this support becomes a difficult task for teachers who are attempting to accommodate students from different ethnic groups, language groups, cultures, family situations, economic situations, and different purposes for learning and learning styles (National Institute for Urban Schools, 2000). Although some of the supports needed may be obvious, a child may be wrongly placed because there is no proper technological assessment available (Mariga, 1993, p. 29). Having the appropriate assessment tools is a prerequisite to recognizing the support that a student needs.

Educational assistants are a positive support in the classroom. However, school boards do not usually provide educational assistants unless the students' disabilities are severe. Without educational assistants, it is up to the teacher to provide the needed support for students to reach their personal goals. A teacher can incorporate daily support by grouping students according to pace and reading levels, which creates a sense of belonging for the students. When the students begin to feel like they belong with their peers, regardless of their exceptionalities, inclusion has begun to take place, with or without the support of an educational assistant.

Differentiated Instruction and Inclusion

Differentiated instruction and inclusion in the classroom increases student engagement for all students. It is important to remember that no students are alike. All students learn differently and bring different challenges to the classroom, including academic, physical, and mental disabilities. Providing the students with visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic learning opportunities is important in helping them feel like they belong in the classroom. Inclusive teachers who

provide students with a variety of ways to learn and demonstrate their learning will increase student engagement.

To engage students in their learning, lessons should include and publicly value the participation of all students across the social and cultural backgrounds found in the classroom (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2013, p. 15). Creating routines and teaching skills in natural daily activities, occurrences, and settings will nurture longer lasting achievement for students with or without disabilities (Katz & Mirenda, 2002, p. 18). When students are free to express their learning in a variety of ways, they begin to feel comfortable in their environment. They develop confidence in their own abilities and are willing to demonstrate them to their peers and teachers. With their newly found confidence, students become more engaged in the new topics taught in the inclusive classroom. Providing the students with opportunities to work with other students of a variety of abilities and backgrounds further stimulates a sense of inclusion for the students.

Educating Parents on Inclusion

Educating parents on what inclusion means and the benefits that inclusive classrooms have on their children is extremely important. When the parents are educated on the benefits that the inclusive classroom can have on their children with or without disabilities, they gain confidence in the capacity of the school to understand and educate their children (Elkins & Van Kraayenoord, 2013, p. 122). When parents see the positive socialization among all students with or without disabilities, they develop a positive attitude toward inclusion.

Some parents have misconceptions about what an inclusive classroom can teach their children. Parents often feel that their children may have to keep up with the other students in the classroom. In order to have an inclusive classroom, not all students have to perform at grade level (Causton-Theoharis & Kasa, n.d. p. 4). It is important for the teacher to explain to the parents that inclusive classrooms ensure all students' success at their own level, and that while doing so, the students gain a sense of belonging in the classroom.

Parents are an essential part of the inclusive classroom team. Whether or not the children have disabilities, it is essential to hear what the parents have to say (Hill, 2009, p. 6). Creating individualized education plans, along with having open communication with the parents, welcomes the parents to see first-hand where their children fit into the classroom and how the inclusive classroom is going to support their children's learning. Collaborative decision making with everyone who is affected should take place (Hill, 2009, p. 9). Parents need to understand the importance of an inclusive classroom. Parents who are educated about the inclusion process, will see the benefits that an inclusive classroom has on their own children. Including parents as part of the team and educating the parents on inclusive classrooms will help to create diversity inside and outside the classroom.

Conclusion

Creating an inclusive classroom does not happen overnight. It could take months for a teacher to create a safe and inclusive classroom wherein all learners feel comfortable and are reaching their fullest potential. It is an ongoing commitment to press schools to become more inclusive (Slee, 2013, p. 4). Inclusive teachers create inclusive classrooms when everyone in the classroom respects diversity. Using inclusion methods creates and maintains a warm and welcoming environment for all students, not only those with exceptionalities. With knowledge gained from professional development opportunities on inclusion strategies and methods, teachers will be confident to provide differentiated instruction to support their students' needs and increase their students' engagement. Parents also play a vital role in an inclusive classroom. Inclusive teachers who establish open lines of communication and collaborative meetings will help the parents see the benefits of an inclusive classroom. Learning in an

inclusive classroom helps our students to gain confidence in their personal abilities and shapes them to accept others for who they are.

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About the Author

Tammy Webster chose education as a career path that would make a difference in our youths' lives. She currently teaches in a multi-grade (5-8) classroom in Swan Valley School Division, and coaches numerous school sport teams. She views the M.Ed. program as an opportunity to gain new knowledge to meet her students' needs.