Inclusion: A Catalyst for School Reform

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Abstract

This article tells the story of one elementary school faculty who responded to the call for accountability by adopting an inclusive view and implementing educational practices where all students were welcomed and considered valuable, contributing members of the school community. The inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education setting did not negatively impact the accountability measures for the school; in fact, the school received a U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon Award. This article briefly describes the process and challenges faced by the faculty, parents, and students as the school began a restructuring plan focused on the inclusion of all students in a supportive school setting.

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to describe the process undertaken by the faculty and staff of an elementary school to transform the school from one that offered the traditional, pull-out special education services to one that provided special education supports in an inclusive manner. The process took several years, and we describe that process along with the challenges undertaken and the successes achieved. A brief description of the school prior to the change is provided followed by a description of activities undertaken each year as the school became more inclusive. Hopefully, our story will help others realize that schools can change and become inclusive institutions that value all children who walk through the front doors.

The School

The elementary school was located in a large metropolitan area in the southwestern United States and had an enrollment of approximately 850 students from preschool through fifth grade, gradually growing to over 1000 students. To accommodate the large number of students, the school operated on a year-round schedule, where approximately 20% of the students and teachers were on break at any given time; this ensured that there were enough classrooms available to accommodate the students. While between 8 and 10 students were bussed in from other school attendance areas to attend a self-contained special education program, the majority of students came from the local neighborhood, which included families in the middle and lower-middle class socioeconomic status. The school had an ethnic mix of approximately 12% African-American, 18% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 67% White. Students spoke twelve different languages. The transience rate was approximately 35%. Special education staff included two early childhood special education teachers and two assistants, two special education teachers and assistants, and one self-contained special education teacher and assistant.

The school was located in one of the largest school districts in the nation. The vast majority of students with disabilities in the district received their special education services through the traditional pullout model, and the district operated four segregated, special education schools along with a plethora of self-contained special education classrooms located on general education campuses. So the idea of developing an inclusive school was met with skepticism from a variety of sources including parents, teachers, and district personnel.

Year One – A Reason for Change

The year began as usual, with the two special education teachers and their assistants providing pullout special education services in the resource room and having relatively little contact with the general education teachers or curriculum. The self-contained classroom was designated as a program for students with severe learning disabilities and only one of the eight students was in our attendance zone, so the others were bussed in from their home schools. The teacher in the self-contained classroom and her assistant provided instruction in the self-contained classroom.

During the first part of the year, a parent of a kindergarten child with a degenerative disability inquired about enrolling her child in an inclusive classroom at this because it was the home school. She explained that the prognosis for her child was poor and the doctor had predicted a relatively short lifespan, and she did not want him to be bussed to a special education kindergarten to be educated only with

children with disabilities. The administrators and parent discussed the child's needs, and the principal told the parent that they needed to review the IEP to determine what services the child needed, and then ensured the parent that her child was welcome at the school and the IEP team would develop a plan to ensure that he would receive his special education support in the general kindergarten setting. One thing that was done almost immediately was the purchase of supportive playground equipment, so the child could participate in recess activities with his peers.

Since the child had intensive needs, the principal contacted professors at the special education department in the local university. As a result, a partnership between the school and the university was developed with the goal of providing training and consultative support to ensure that children, particularly those with more severe disabilities, who attended this school, were provided with supports in an inclusive setting. As part of the partnership, a team from the school consisting of the principal, kindergarten teacher, and the parent joined a team from the university and received training on inclusive programming at the University of Vermont. During the training, when the team was in Vermont, the child who was the catalyst for this whole process died. This certainly impacted the team and helped the school team realize that the inclusive process was the best model of schooling and could serve to help transform their school. What they had noted was that during the child's last few months, he was with other children without disabilities, engaging in activities with his typically developing peers (with supports), and was provided the opportunity to attend his neighborhood school just like every other kindergarten child in his neighborhood. He was not bussed off to a distant program because the home school refused to serve him and thought he belonged somewhere else. In fact, his death really helped the entire school staff realize that they had done the right thing for this young boy and his family. Shortly after his death an area of the kindergarten playground was dedicated in his memory.

This tragic death combined with the training from the University of Vermont helped the team realize that they should work with the faculty and staff to re-evaluate the provision of special education services. Shortly after returning from Vermont, the principal and other team members shared the information with all faculty and staff at the regularly scheduled staff meetings. There was some faculty resistance to suggestions that we implement an inclusive education model. Five major areas of concern expressed by general educators included: 1) lack of training necessary to work with children with disabilities, 2) unfamiliarity regarding educational expectations, 3) potential impact children with disabilities would have on the classroom, 4) the extent to which teachers would have to change current practices to accommodate these children, and 5) whether children with significant disabilities really belonged in the general education classroom. Additionally, special education teachers expressed some concern regarding the different role and function they would serve in the school.

The idea of developing an inclusive school was presented at an ideal time, because staff had already been discussing the idea of implementing a shared governance process that would include input from parents and other community constituents. This process provided an opportunity for faculty to fully discuss concerns and brainstorm solutions.

Part of that discussion included revisiting the school mission and developing a motto. Included in the discussion was the

question of whether we really believed that "all children could learn" or just repeated the phrase without really considering the real meaning. After several discussions and small group meetings, the following motto was selected, "We Celebrate All Children." Prior to accepting this motto, the staff discussed what the motto meant and whether it really embraced the beliefs at the school. While this may seem simplistic, we had to discuss what it really meant to celebrate all children and clarify to whom "all" referred. In particular, did all mean only those children who spoke English, only those who acquired academic skills easily, only those who didn't have disabilities, or all children who attended our school. The staff determined that it really meant that as a school, we would celebrate the learning of each child, the culture of each child, and the humanity of each child, regardless of ability. This discussion and clarification of values naturally invited a discussion of living up to those beliefs and beginning the process of transforming the school to an inclusive school where all were valued and celebrated – a difficult thing to do when children are segregated and placed in special education classrooms.

In addition, to in-house discussions, other professionals from the local university and the school district were invited to faculty meetings to discuss inclusive practices. The university faculty, in particular, provided a degree of credibility to the idea of inclusive education. They spoke about trends, best practices, benefits for children with and without disabilities, and provided information regarding curricular adaptations and modifications. The range of speakers helped demystify the process and ensured faculty that they did have the skills needed to develop an inclusive school. In addition, the faculty realized that inclusion was a process and no one would be expected to know all the answers regarding the educational needs of a particular child. However, as a team, the faculty could identify and provide supports that would enable them to work effectively with all children.

Before the beginning of the next school year, the name of the resource room was changed to the Creative Learning Center, and it became a place where any child could go for assistance. Additionally, the administrators and self-contained teacher met to discuss including those children in a general education classroom. This teacher strongly supported including her students and volunteered to be the first special education teacher to co-teach on a regular basis. Two general education teachers were identified and they volunteered to be the general education teacher for these children.

Parents of the students were then called and IEP meetings were re-convened. We reviewed the progress each child had made on his IEP and then discussed the idea of providing special education and supports in the general education setting. Several parents were concerned with the proposal. This is probably understandable, because others had recently told these same parents that their children needed self-contained special education services due to the severity of their disabilities. To help alleviate any concerns, the parents were assured that if their children were not making progress, they could be moved back to a self-contained setting.

Year Two – Closing the Self-Contained Classroom

The students from the self-contained program began their school year in general education classrooms with supports provided by the self-contained teacher and her assistant. Other students continued to participate in the pullout resource room (Creative Learning Center) as they had in the past. This year allowed one special

education teacher to demonstrate that the supports could be provided to children in the general education setting without disrupting the educational environment. In fact, as the staff talked among themselves, they heard that the special education teacher and her assistant were actually providing supports to other students in the classroom who were having difficulties, thus the teachers were able to successfully teach more children. Those who still had doubts began to understand that the children with and without disabilities were able to learn within the context of the general education setting. These children did not have to be self-contained to learn. In fact, the children began interacting more with their peers without disabilities than they had when they only saw them at recess or were those "special kids" who came to art or PE but really weren't part of the class. At the beginning of the year, the self-contained teacher told the administrator that transportation wanted to pick the students up 15 minutes before the end of the day so they could get to another school to pick up students (remember most of these students were bussed to our school). Considering that 15 minutes per day times 180 school days = 45 hours of instructional time, this was an arrangement that would not be acceptable. When considering the school motto of "We Celebrate All Children" letting children who have difficulty learning due to their disabilities leave 15 minutes early and lose 45 hours of instructional time, would be in conflict with that motto. It would really be a demonstration that we valued their education less than that of children without disabilities - we certainly wouldn't have let parents of children without disabilities pickup their children 15 minutes early every day. Now, the transportation department was not entirely thrilled with our unwillingness to let the children leave early. So after approximately two weeks of unreturned phone calls and haggling with transportation, we let the students leave 3 minutes early. We agreed on three minutes, because little actual instruction occurs during the last three minutes of school and there was no other way we could fit all the busses into our bus turnaround. It seems that, to settle our dispute, the transportation department went to a different school and picked up their children 15 minutes early before coming to our school. It is just too bad that some kids had to lose 45 hours of instruction.

During that year, as part of the self-governance plan, the staff development committee had provided training to the entire staff on special education issues, effective instructional strategies, and changing the school culture regarding the education of children with disabilities. The cultural change included expectations that teachers would take responsibility for the learning of all students in their classrooms coupled with the assurance that teachers would be provided with supports necessary to ensure that they could succeed at this task. As a whole, faculty accepted the responsibility of working together to ensure that all children received an equitable education. This was done in anticipation of the changes that would be implemented in the following year.

At the end of the year, the district notified us that they would be moving the self-contained classroom to another school but would allow us, after some serious negotiating, to keep the self-contained teacher and her assistant for one more year. When parents of the children heard about the program move, some came to talk with us. Interestingly, those parents who had been most nervous about the inclusive programming were now vocalizing their concern that the next school might try to self-contain their children. They noted that their children had developed friendships,

increased their self-esteem, liked going to school, and had been learning.

Year Three – Changes for the Resource Room

During the third year of our school's transformation, we closed one resource room, but there was still one resource room providing pull-out support throughout the day. The teacher and her assistant from the closed classroom were now responsible for providing special education and supports in the general education setting or in alternate settings. This required a professional stretch for all involved. Teachers were not necessarily accustomed to team teaching and/or consulting, but the special education teacher and her assistant were provided with the freedom to develop their own schedules so they could visit with classroom teachers, identify curricular adaptations or modifications, determine the supports that would be provided for different instructional units and schedule when the services would be provided.

The special education teacher and her assistant did not provide all supports in the general education classroom. They did hold small group reading and math instruction with children from multiple classrooms; however, the groups did not necessarily consist only of children with disabilities. In many cases, children who were falling behind, children who had missed content due to illness, or children who were English Language Learners were incorporated into the small instruction groups.

Year Four – Continued Change

We began this year with one less special education teacher and assistant, because the district reassigned the self-contained teacher and her assistant. However, we still had two special education teachers and two assistants. There were no major changes during that year, except the remaining resource room was shut down for half the day; thereby, freeing up that teacher and her assistant to provide supports and services in the general education settings.

Year Five– No More K-5 Resource Rooms

Following a remodeling of the building, the resource teachers were each provided with an office, but no classroom. The expectations at the school had gradually changed during this process and it was a natural occurrence for the special education teachers to work directly with the general education teachers. Thus, the Creative Learning Center no longer existed. However, any student who required additional assistance was still able to receive that from one of the special education teachers if necessary.

Some Final Stories and Thoughts

During this time, we did have two students with severe disabilities who required additional adult assistance. The assistants were trained and were expected to provide support to other students whenever they could without depriving the child with a disability of the service he or she required.

One year, we had a child enroll who used a wheelchair. The thresholds of the entry doors were high and she was not strong enough to wheel herself over the hump. Since we wanted to encourage independence and let her enter the building herself, we contacted the maintenance department and asked that a small incline be placed in front of the doors to make then accessible.

Since our school was operating so differently than others in the district, we frequently found re-writing IEPs and ourselves reviewing when students came to our school. Two cases stick out. One was an intermediate student who came from another school in the district where he received pull-out resource support in

academic areas. He read at a pre-primer level, and his mother stated that he really disliked school. We talked with them and described how we would be able to meet his needs in the general education classroom with supports rather than pulling him out of class. He reluctantly agreed, but two months later, his mother reported that he liked school, was learning to read, and readily got up for school in the morning. That was quite a change for this young man who was not accepted and valued as an individual and not stigmatized by his removals to the special education class. The other student came to us from out-of-state where he received special education in a self-contained classroom. After reviewing his IEP, we were confident that we could meet his needs in the general education classroom after we made some adjustments for supervision. When he transferred to another school, his foster mother stated that this was the first time he had been in a general education classroom and that he had really looked forward to coming to school. He even began to develop a friendship with one of his typically developing peers.

When the administrators assigned students to different teachers, they attempted to balance the classes by gender, ethnicity, achievement, primary language, and disability. This was done to ensure that each classroom was representative of the diversity that made up our community. Attention was paid to ensure that a student who spoke only Spanish was in a class with other Spanish-speakers.

During this time, the administrators battled advocates who tried to place children in self-contained settings as well as school district personnel who wanted restrictive placements. On one occasion, a district employee asked if the administration would support moving a child with a visual impairment to a self-contained classroom several miles away. When asked the reason, he responded that they had the equipment at the school and had a full time teacher. The administrator noted that we had full time teachers at our school and if the child needed the equipment, it needed to come to the school. Consequently, no equipment came (because the child didn't need it) and the district employee could not justify why the child should be moved. We later found out that the self-contained classroom was short on students – only three students and one teacher. Makes you wonder about people's motivations.

In closing, we firmly believe that the inclusive program developed at the school was superior to the traditional model. While this school reform was conducted prior to the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), there is nothing in NCLB that would have directly impacted the changes implemented. This process of restructuring with an emphasis on inclusion really did help transform a school, and it is difficult, probably impossible, to know if the change in philosophy drove the change in behavior or if the demonstrated success of inclusive programming changed the beliefs and philosophy. We think there was probably a little of both.

In our school, children were referred to as children. You just simply did not hear the phrase "special ed" kids at the school. Faculty and staff developed a common ownership of all children and we hoped that all children felt that they were valued members of the school. Another phrase or two you never heard was "see him? He is an inclusion student" or "Mr. Smith is our fourth grade inclusion teacher." Those phrases imply that it is still acceptable to exclude students, but since students were evenly spread across classrooms, they were our students and that type of useless labeling did not occur.

Of course, inclusion is a process, and we still had work to do. Two things that were a priority were developing an inclusive early childhood special education program and improving services to our growing number of English Language Learners. Since we left the school for other positions, we can only hope that those were priorities for the new administration.

Resources for Additional Information

1) Circle of Inclusion – This site provides information about effective inclusive practices for children from B through 8 years of age. www.circleofinclusion.org
2) Inclusion.com – This site provides information on person-centered planning and working with the community to promote inclusive practices. www.inclusion.com
3) Family Village – This site provides a wealth of information on inclusive practices from a global perspective and has numerous links to disability sites. www.familyvillage.wisc.edu
4) Center on Human Policy – The Center, located at Syracuse University, provides resources for inclusion and community based practices including training, research information, and policy statements.
5) Center on Disability and Community Inclusion – The Center, located at the University of Vermont, provides information regarding person-centered training and other inclusive practices. www.uvm.edu/~cdci/

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