

# Interactions and Practices to Enhance the Inclusion Experience

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## Abstract

In a collaborative research project, two inclusion teachers and their principal demonstrate ways to enhance the inclusion experience for five exceptional students: four with mild intellectual disabilities and one with a learning disability. The findings revealed that one teacher engaged in positive interactions in the classroom by positioning the exceptional learners as "knowers" (Fairclough, 1995) among their peers while at the same time differentiating instruction. A second teacher placed an emphasis on facilitating social learning and establishing predictable and accountable routines. The principal held "Good New Visits" with the students one to two times per week in response to written memos from their teachers as a means of engendering positive trust relationships with the students.

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## Keywords

inclusion, students with exceptionalities

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Making inclusion work requires more than a philosophical commitment for both principal and teacher. It requires school level integration, classroom level strategies (Villa & Thousand, 2003), and just as importantly, positioning students as 'knowers' in the classroom (Fairclough, 1995). Inclusion has become part of the critical reform movement to improve the delivery of services for students with exceptionalities. For such school-wide reform, principals and teachers must first and foremost display a positive attitude and commitment to inclusion (Evans, Bird, Ford, Green, & Bischoff, 1992). According to Goodlad and Lovitt (1993), the decision to develop an inclusive school depends largely upon leaders' values and beliefs. Due to their leadership position, principals' attitudes can result in increased opportunities for students with exceptionalities to be truly included in the school community.

A key ingredient in inclusion success may be communicating to the students with exceptionalities that they matter. *Mattering* is a child's sense of his or her significance to others, particularly at the early adolescent age, when learners determine from whom they will ask and accept help based on their perception of how others will respond (Adams & Marshall, 1996). Inclusion is not only about inclusionary strategies in regular education classrooms, but also involves an attitudinal stance or what Rex (2000) describes as interactional inclusion in which teachers facilitate exceptional students' entry into the community of learning through their words, actions, and approaches to curriculum.

Similarly, teachers' attitudes of attachment, concern, indifference, and rejection have been found to directly impact students' educational experiences and opportunities (Brophy & Good, 1974; Cook, 2001). Teach-

ers who perceive students to be low achievers (as is the case for many students with exceptionalities) often come to think of these students solely in behavioral terms. Teachers have fewer interactions with them and the interactions they do have lack instructional content because they feel they do not know how to address their unique characteristics and needs (Cook, Semmel, & Gerber, 1999; Jordan & Stanovich, 2001). Teachers' attitudes toward included students have been described as simply giving up (Cook, et al., 1999). Yet the latest research indicates that the learning process is highly modifiable and shaped by individual student characteristics in interaction with context. Of utmost importance is student-teacher discourse and scaffolded activities (Butler & Cartier, 2005; Baker, Gersten, & Scanlon, 2002). Inclusion teachers and administrators need tangible ideas for how to interact in positive and productive ways with students who are sometimes challenging to instruct.

In this one year collaborative research project at Aberdeen Elementary School (pseudonym), I explored the research question: In what ways may teachers and the principal facilitate positive interactions with students with exceptionalities to support their inclusion experience? I observed three students and their teacher in a grade six classroom and two students and their teacher in a grade seven classroom six times each during their 50-minute blocks over the course of two semesters. I also conducted tape-recorded interviews with educators to examine the ways in which they sought to engage four students with mild intellectual disabilities and one student with learning disabilities. Also the students were interviewed about their perceptions about "mattering" and inclusion. This was an interpretive ethnography in which I

explored the nature of teachers' experiences in being more inclusive of students with exceptionalities. In common with all qualitative research, "this can only be achieved by first-hand observation and participation in 'natural' settings and guided by an exploratory orientation" (Hammersley, 1992, p. 12). The grade six classroom enrolled 32 students and the grade seven classroom 31 students in this ethnically diverse elementary school (K-7) of low socioeconomic status. The city was a mid-sized industrial city with high ethnic and economic diversity in central Canada.

### **Lily, Jason, and Renaldo: Positioning Exceptional Learners as "Knowers" in the Classroom**

To grade six teacher Ms. Chelsea, communicating to exceptional students Lily, Jason, and Renaldo that they mattered meant positioning them as "knowing" students in the classroom by differentiating instruction, validating their ideas and performance, and setting up a classroom that was flexible and accessible. Ms. Chelsea was a teacher in her mid-thirties with 8 years experience who had a reputation for her success in working with special education students. Students Lily and Jason were diagnosed with mild intellectual disabilities and were reading at the grade 3 level. Lily was a quiet student who worked well with many students in the class. Jason was impulsive and often got into squabbles with other students. He loved the individual attention his teacher gave him and worked well with Lily and one other student in class. Renaldo had a severe learning disability. He was known for his extensive general knowledge and quick wit. His writing was phonemic and his reading was delayed by approximately three years.

#### *Differentiation*

Ms. Chelsea used differentiation to support students' needs. For example, Renaldo conducted an interest-based investigation of monsters of Nepal and prepared an oral presentation using a graphic organizer based on his web-based research while other students were investigating more traditional aspects of various countries and preparing mostly written presentations. Selection of materials and topics that are interesting and relevant to students positively affects learning, motivation, effort, and attitudes (Fink, 1996). Changing the content of assignments based on interest or student readiness was routine in Ms. Chelsea's class. Readiness is simply a student's entry point in relation to a particular understanding or skill (Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003). One of the most common challenges among students with learning disabilities (LD) is an ability to focus and sustain attention, yet when engaged in areas of strength and interest and engaged in positive interaction, students like Renaldo who struggle with literacy activities show high levels of motivation to read (Worthy, Patterson, Salas, Prater, & Turner, 2002).

Ms. Chelsea provided Lily and Jason, students with mild intellectual disabilities who had less-developed readiness, more explicit help in closing the gaps in their learning, and designed more activities that were structured or that required a greater dependence on the teacher. For example, she used a purposeful traffic pattern for helping with seat work, providing highlighted textbooks and selective pairing with compatible students. Also critical to their success was differentiation based on their learning profile which encompasses their learning needs, preferences, and simply how they learn. Much of this information was gathered early in the year from school records and professionals who had worked with the students in previous years.

These students needed explicit dialogue and prompting to bridge the gap between oral and written language. Ms. Chelsea understood the importance of modeling and thinking aloud about strategies and ideas when she interacted with her exceptional students.

While Jason's written work was rather weak with written responses totaling 3-4 sentences, he liked to read expository books at his level (about grade 3), particularly about outdoor life. His teacher provided opportunities for discussion, creative responses, and high interest/low vocabulary resources, such as expository magazines. These include many labeled pictures and diagrams to support comprehension. Differentiating the materials and work products for the exceptional students was a significant way in which the teacher communicated that they mattered.

#### *Interactional Inclusion*

Renaldo received regular validation for his world knowledge and his unusual interests which Ms. Chelsea routinely brought to the attention of the class. She sometimes sent other students to Renaldo for help with finding information on the web. When Jason, Lily, and Renaldo completed their work, like their classmates, they took up questions and critiques from other students and decided which suggestions for improvement they could implement.

The teacher positioned these vulnerable students for academic success as she carried out what Rex (2000) describes as interactional inclusion. In such a context, vulnerable students were positioned to be observed as capable classroom members. The teacher created the conditions of active participation. For example, in taking up questions, if she did not understand what was said the first time, she said what she did understand so the student could add on or restate what was meant. She

often repeated back part of the speaker's question to give the student another opportunity to reconstruct it, providing second opportunities to articulate meanings (Rex, 2000). Another desirable practice involved elaborating on short yes/no questions that the student had formulated to achieve maximum learning while modeling open-ended discussion questioning. Another suggestion by Short and Echevarria (2005) is to establish discussion routines (for example, asking students to paraphrase one another), which provides structures for discussions and teaches students to be active listeners. Attending to the classroom talk so that exceptional students' voices are elevated was a critical aspect of leveling the playing field for exceptional students.

#### *Flexibility and Universal Design*

For Jason and Lily, Ms. Chelsea would allow flexible pacing of work, provide instruction to them as a team, and read tests aloud in which she would not only assess, but also use the test to teach them. The teacher and students shared many of the learning decisions regarding the activities and topics of inquiry which contributed to high student engagement.

Jason said in his interview that he knew he mattered to Ms. Chelsea because she "gave you a thousand hints but never the answer." Ms. Chelsea also showed her concern and interest in her special education students by having lunch with them a few times a semester to discuss some of the ways they could work together in the classroom and generally "to get to know what was happening in their lives." Universal design made such flexibility possible in Ms. Chelsea's classroom. The underlying premise of universal design is the largest number of people possible should benefit from practices and environments without the need for additional modifications

beyond those incorporated in the original design. Individual differences are assumed and anticipated at the outset. Ms. Chelsea, for example, introduced a unit on space exploration to her grade six class. She listed vocabulary on the board and three questions which contained the key vocabulary. She asked students to work in pairs to figure out what each word meant, using dictionaries after they had discussed possible meanings. She then led a discussion using the questions and a graphic organizer to guide their listening. Jason and Lily were comfortable with the meaning of much of the vocabulary because Ms. Chelsea had previewed the words with them in a five minute mini-lesson using pictures from the textbook, and already had assigned them the vocabulary as homework the night before. Such preview mini-lessons were part of Ms. Chelsea's universal design. While components of universal design, such as visual aids, previewing of vocabulary, explicit traffic patterns, etc. make learning easier for all students, they are essential for the success of students such as Jason, Lily and Renaldo.

#### *Discussion-based Curriculum*

This was an interactive classroom in which students were engaged in topics of inquiry and the teacher facilitated their learning through a variety of discussions and strategies. The exceptional students received ample teacher support, different assignments, and differentiated processes and content to complete the assignments. The teacher recognized that learners brought a fund of cultural and intellectual resources to the classroom from their diverse backgrounds and drew on these to enrich the curriculum. High-quality discussions and exploration of ideas were trademarks of Ms. Chelsea's classroom. She was particularly adept at taking up and building on the student's previous comment and/or the

intended message of the student, not just the words. She devoted substantial time to the free exchange of ideas among students, emphasizing different interpretations of readings instead of consensus interpretation which researchers find supports students' literacy learning in the middle grades (Langer, 1995). The focus on classroom discussion enhanced literacy learning and made text more accessible.

#### **Jesse and Stephanie: Facilitating Social Learning**

Ms. Lucas, an enthusiastic first year teacher, communicated to Jesse and Stephanie that they mattered by facilitating their social integration in the classroom. Ms. Lucas was eager to help exceptional students, and not unlike many first year teachers, was very pre-occupied with good classroom management. She placed considerable emphasis on participation structures, respectful language, and basic accommodations to help learners remain focused. Jesse and Stephanie were both diagnosed with mild intellectual disabilities. Jesse was a very reluctant student who, without Ms. Lucas's encouragement, would drift to the margins of the classroom. Jesse was reading at the grade three level and wrote reluctantly. Stephanie was highly social and thrived on the social interactions afforded in this classroom. Stephanie liked to read and while she struggled with the content textbooks, she read novels and could write two-page responses when she was motivated.

#### *Predictable Structures, Routines, and Small Groups*

Jesse and Stephanie loved their rotary class in social studies with Ms. Lucas. "You get to talk about everything and sit with your friends... as long as you do your work," said Stephanie. Students knew what to expect in

Ms. Lucas's class. Ms. Lucas routinely broke the social studies block into direct instruction followed by some paired or group work which gave them opportunities to learn with their peers. While this was a more traditional classroom than Ms. Chelsea's, Ms. Lucas had figured out a balance between direct whole group instruction, small group, and individual instruction which made learning feasible for Jesse and Stephanie. The students had bought into her structures and routines. The most striking feature of Ms. Lucas's class was her awareness of the students' social needs and her ability to attend to their needs while teaching. For example, she effectively used cooperative learning structures, which gave them the social interaction time this age group values while still accomplishing her learning outcomes. For her students with exceptionalities, she carefully chose their group so that they had "students who would help in the right way. Not just do everything for them." She refused to get bogged down in the trivial, such as lost supplies and missing books etc.; she would supply these without recrimination. The students had regular jobs more commonly associated with younger grades, such as ensuring that everyone had their textbooks and setting up of the overhead projector etc. Both Jesse and Stephanie were clearly part of this class as evidenced by their integration in group projects and their ownership of the classroom routines and rules. By enabling collaborative structures, students' voices are more likely to be heard and respected, and their self-expression amplified. Conversation among peers allows students the opportunity to rehearse the dialogue, self-talk, and skilled problem-solving while teachers embed instruction in new strategies at critical points (Englert, Raphael, & Mariage, 1994). Research clearly shows that students in small groups in the classroom learn significantly

more than students who are not instructed in small groups (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, Moody, & Schumm, 2000).

### *Respectful Nudging Language*

Ms. Lucas depended on peer tutoring, breaking work into small parts, and her own scaffolding alongside her special needs students to support their learning needs. She also spoke in proactive nudging language (Tobin, 2006) – using prompting and inquiring comments about the next step in which she assumed the best intentions, sometimes in light of contradictory evidence. For example Ms. Lucas said: "When you're finished working on the first part, Jesse, could you share yours with me?" [It didn't appear that he was working on the first part but this got him started]. Inherent in her communication with Jesse and Stephanie was the important message that she valued their intellect and contributions. This was evident by the ways in which she took up their ideas and suggestions and the time she took to talk individually with them during natural transitions and during seat work.

Even though Ms. Lucas claimed several times during her interview that she didn't really know for sure what worked in keeping the interactions positive and productive with Jesse and Stephanie, her interview revealed several strategies and insights for doing so. She spoke of "keeping them on-track by using memory strategies like linking up key ideas with a key word, following a set routine, and showing them respect and expecting to get that respect back". She realized that talk did not have to be always "funneled through the teacher" and she emphasized participation structures. She made light of and often ignored minor infractions such as lost or forgotten supplies which got the students off to a negative start in other classes. She allowed for nosier transitions between large group and

small group work and proceeded with instructions in a calm low voice when most of the students were ready. While her curriculum was non-differentiated, she made basic adaptations such as permitting oral responses to tests, reducing the number of items in an assignment, allowing more time, as well as pairing them with compatible tutors. She had managed to get the tone of teaching right through her respectful language and attitude.

### *Helping Students to Stay Focused*

Jesse in particular needed support to stay focused, so Ms. Lucas provided him with a copy of her overhead notes and a highlighter pen and instructed him to highlight the points she emphasized as she talked, whereas other students, including Stephanie, took notes. Jesse was then able to keep up with the rest of the class during direct instruction during social studies. His hole-punched sheet then went into his notes binder. Attention to such details led to effective learning for Jesse. Ms. Lucas spoke of her attention to instructional language and her carefulness not to overwhelm students. Attention to the density of teacher talk and the teacher's choice of phrases, vocabulary, and explanations can either be part of the instructional problem or part of the solution in terms of helping students stay focused.

To help Stephanie stay focused, the teacher used preferential seating close to her and the overhead projector, and she also received first checking by the teacher who had an intentional traffic pattern at which time she checked some students work to see that their notes were accurate. Planning for strategies to keep exceptional learners focused was part of Ms. Lucas's universal design - the way her classroom was set up for from the onset. Assuming such differences in attention and perseverance and planning for them diminished

frustration and lead to effective classroom management.

### **“Good News Visits” with Principal Ms. Bartlett**

In response to weekly memos from teachers, the school principal would meet with the special education students individually to discuss the positive happenings described in the memo. Some examples of these messages included explicit praise for accomplishments such as: “Stephanie understands perimeter in math,” “Lily did a great job with the snake art,” and “Renaldo did a great job on snow removal” etc. At other times, they focused on growth areas in behavior: “Stephanie handled a potentially bad situation by talking to him and telling him how she and her friends felt about what he was saying (gossiping) about them.” The principal, Ms. Bartlett, would start by telling the student this was a good news visit and make an inquiry about the topic of the memo, which gave them an opportunity to show or retell what they had learned or done.

The principal conducted many of the visits on the school grounds during recess and lunch hour and others in her office or the school hallways. She would start by saying that “It's been brought to my attention that...” and ask the students to explain what they had been learning or doing.

Ms. Bartlett describes kicking it [the conversation] up a notch as in this exchange with Stephanie: “What if the angle were shifted this way? Would it be this kind of angle or would it be something else?”

Ms. Bartlett reported that the good news visits were worthwhile for several reasons. Foremost the students obviously were pleased with the recognition. Secondly, they realized that their principal was in communication with their classroom teachers about



them. Thirdly, when these same students landed in her office for disciplinary reasons, a positive rapport had already been established and she could frame the misbehavior as “a temporary setback” and make reference to some of the positive happenings she had heard about them. And finally, the teachers also reported feeling better supported by the principal in their work with the special education students.

### **Enhancing the Inclusion Experience**

Students need a ‘leg-up’ to enter the inclusive classroom community so that they can become an integral part of the learning community. When Ms. Chelsea put forward the work and ideas of her exceptional learners in tactful and authentic ways, she communicated to all students that she valued their presence and their achievements in her classroom.

Inclusion teachers require strong student engagement skills. It is critical to engage exceptional children in their learning while also attending to their social and emotional needs. Not only do students need acknowledgement from school principals about their learning accomplishments and growth, they also need their principal to be an instructional leader in the school. In addition to facilitating positive interactions around their work, the principal needs to provide support and feedback to teachers to develop environments for teaching heterogeneous groups of students.

Both teachers in the study revealed their underlying beliefs about what it means to be a good teacher and what constitutes reasonable inclusion practices. For Ms. Chelsea, including students meant involving them in the development of a community of inquirers, differentiating instruction, and using her own voice in the classroom to elevate their status among their peers. For her part, Ms. Lucas

depended on facilitating social interaction with her peers, folding them into her accountability routines, and basic accommodation strategies to keep her students with exceptionalities involved in her classroom.

Some of the students proved to be particularly open about their views on whether they mattered to their teachers or felt included in their classrooms:

“My teacher [Ms. Chelsea] really needs me. If I’m away she misses me and my ideas and stuff. Also Jason can’t do stuff on his own when I’m away... She [my teacher] tries to understand what I’m saying even if she has to wait. ...And when I’m lowering my head a bit that means I’m sad and she comes and talks to me (Renaldo).”

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