

SEAMLESS TEACHING

NAVIGATING THE INCLUSION SPECTRUM

Giving Gen Ed Teachers the Tools to Realize the Potential of Inclusive Classrooms

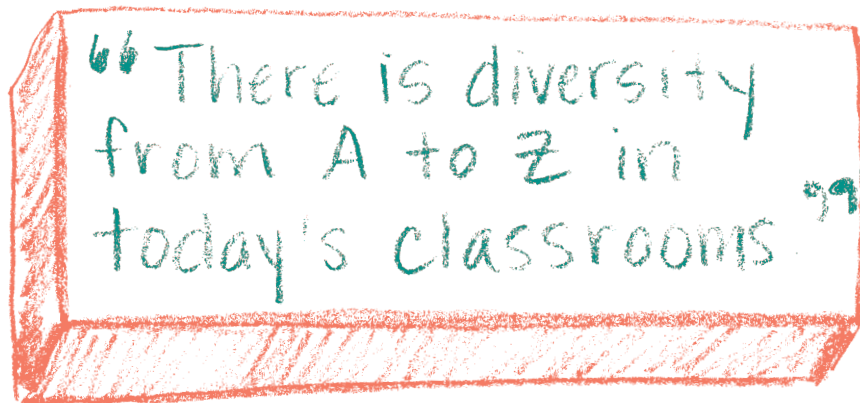
BY LOIS BARRETT ILLUSTRATION BY SUNNY PAULK

IN SCHOOLS ACROSS THE COUNTRY, students in special education and general education are increasingly learning together in inclusive classrooms. This is a significant civil-rights achievement, but it also means students in special

education are being taught by general education teachers who may not have the training and skills to best serve them.

What does this mean for teachers on the ground? “There is diversity from A to Z in today’s classroom, and

teachers need support and encouragement in acquiring the skills to serve all of these children,” says Sharen Bertrando, special education development program specialist at WestEd’s Center for Prevention and Early Intervention.



What general education teachers should know

The central legislative force behind education's inclusion movement is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)—the federal law that mandates that all children with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education and that “to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities ... [should be] educated with children who are not disabled.” The law also requires that each child be placed in the least restrictive environment—the educational space most like that

of the child's typically developing peers in which she can succeed academically.

Once a child is identified as having a disability (as defined by IDEA), an individualized education program (IEP)

is crafted by a team of school professionals and the child's parents or guardians. IEPs include information on academic performance, emotional and behavioral issues, and academic and behavioral goals. Teachers have a legal responsibility to implement the requirements outlined in the IEP.

Betsy Weigle, a fourth-grade general education teacher at Adams

Elementary School in Spokane, Wash., says, “IEPs are written in very formal language and can be hard to decipher.” She recommends teachers “go to the person who wrote [the IEP] to get an overview and go over the child's goals together.”

That person is often a special education teacher with a wealth of experience and training for general education teachers to tap into. From model-teaching a lesson to looking over unit plans, a special education teacher's expertise is an essential resource for the inclusive classroom. School psychologists, reading specialists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists and physical therapists, depending on the disability, can also give valuable input.

Barry W. Birnbaum, author of *Foundations of Special Education Leadership: Administration, Placement, and the Law*, suggests general education teachers shore up their skills by taking continuing-education units in special education. Principals can also arrange for special education coursework to be offered on teachers' in-service days, says Birnbaum.

Acquiring the skills and strategies

Fill out a helpful agreement with your co-teacher.

Go to tolerance.org/precollaboration-agreement

to work with students with special needs is essential. It's also important to get to know the whole child. This should include building a relationship with the family. “Very often, parents are left out of the equation,” says Rick Wolfsdorf, a collaborative special education teacher at John W. Dodd Middle School in Freeport, N.Y., “but they shouldn't be. They need to be a part of the team effort.”

Teaching to All Learners

When students in general education and special education share a classroom, it is crucial their teacher create an environment that brings out the strengths of each. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an education approach based on the philosophy that there is no one way in which individuals learn and that lessons, curriculum and classroom configuration should be designed, from the outset, with the needs of diverse students in mind.

UDL calls for instructional goals, methods, materials and assessments to be aligned with the following guidelines:

- Provide *multiple means of representation*—Present content in different ways to give students a variety of options for acquiring information and knowledge.
- Provide *multiple means of expression*—Ensure students have a variety of ways of demonstrating what they know.
- Provide *multiple means of engagement*—Create a stimulating learning environment by offering various ways for a student to engage, based on preferences and interests.

Differentiated Instruction (DI)—the process of modifying instruction and assessment, as needed, to meet the learning needs of a particular student—also allows educators to teach or make assessments in a variety of ways, based on the interests, abilities and knowledge

base of each student. Brad Cohen, assistant principal at Addison Elementary School in Marietta, Ga., insists on seeing differentiated instruction at work in his classrooms. “If you are a teacher and you are teaching all the children in your class the same way, you are not hitting all of their needs,” he says.

The Inclusion Spectrum

Many experts endorse the growing trend toward classes co-taught by a full-time general education teacher and a full-time special education teacher. “There shouldn’t be just one teacher in a classroom, if an inclusion effort is to be successful,” says David J. Connor, associate professor of special education/learning disabilities at Hunter College in New York, N.Y.

According to Connor, building a collaborative teaching relationship is an ongoing process that requires openness and flexibility. He recommends that co-teachers get to know each other before sharing a classroom.

Wolfsdorf says that co-teachers must clarify roles: “Establishing what each is going to do is really important.” Discussing how the class will be structured is key as well. Wolfsdorf says that teachers should strive for seamless teaching. “The students shouldn’t be able to tell which teacher is special education and which is general education,” he says.

Co-teaching, or collaborative teaching, is widely considered the gold standard for educating students with special needs, but inclusion looks different at different schools. Special education teachers or specialists may enter general education classrooms for a set period of time to deliver individualized or small-group instruction to students

in special education (push-in model), or students may leave general education classrooms to receive individualized or small-group instruction (pull-out model). The relationship-building tips above apply to these models as well.

While push-in or pull-out situations may not be ideal, there are still ways to achieve a positive outcome for your students. Students with special needs often feel stigmatized by the special education label; the teacher’s positive attitude can be a mitigating factor. Weigle says that when her students with special needs leave for special instruction, she doesn’t say, “You’re going to special education,” but rather, “You’re going to another classroom. You learn best in a small group—that’s great, go off and do that!”



Weigle offers these tips for general education teachers working with a pull-out inclusion model:

- Invite the special education teacher or specialist to your classroom to see how the student does in a larger setting. “This is particularly important for students with behavior goals written into their IEPs.”

- Make sure the student who leaves your classroom for instruction is working with the same content as your students in general education. To achieve this goal, you must devote time to meeting and planning with the special education teacher.

- It may seem easier to place students in special education near the classroom door since they may leave the classroom more often. However, these students generally benefit from sitting close to the teacher where they can receive individualized instruction.

Wherever their schools fall on the inclusion spectrum,

Techniques and Ideas for Teaching Students with Social Skills Difficulties

BY SHARON JURMAN

- Select two classmate buddies for friendship and social communication.
- Model and script social cues and response repertoires.
- Role-play social situations.
- Tell the child why a verbal response was inappropriate.
- Designate teams for assignments or games; don’t allow the students to choose teams.

Sometimes one or two simple changes can make a world of difference for a child with special needs. Visit tolerance.org/techniques for a complete list of techniques for a variety of situations.

general education teachers who take the time to acquire new skills and learn more about students in special education are fulfilling the potential of IDEA by building truly equitable classrooms. “By doing inclusion well, we remove the barriers that might prevent our special education students from enjoying the opportunities their peers do,” says Weigle, “and that could make all the difference when it comes to them leading productive and rewarding lives.” ♦



Toolkit

Learn more about co-teaching and push-in inclusion models.

VISIT» tolerance.org/gen-ed-special-ed