

family

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Abstract

"Special education needs to be reconceptualised as a support to the regular education classroom, rather than as 'another place to go'". This article says mainstreaming means you are a visitor and inclusion makes you part of the family. It looks at the fundamental values of children being part of the neighbourhood school, such as overcoming isolation and loneliness, and uses the Judith Snow quote; "the only disability is having no relationships". It provides some basic guidelines on inclusive schooling and discusses the need for administrative commitment. **Keywords: Education, School age**

differently requires commitment to cooperative learning, effective instructional strategies such as direct instruction, peer mediated learning approaches such as peer tutoring, and cross-age groupings.

Lessons Learned

Our recent experiences with inclusion have taught us some things that might be helpful to others. They are:

- *There is a bad inclusion and good inclusion.* Good inclusion requires an absolute understanding and administrative commitment to reallocating resources currently targeted for special education. You need to be prepared to spend at least as many resources as you now spend on pullout and/or traditional special education programs by reallocating these dollars for special education supports within the regular education class.

- *There is nothing pervasively wrong with special education.* What is being questioned is not the interventions and knowledge that has been acquired through special education training and research. Rather, what is being challenged is the location where these supports are being provided to students with disabilities.

Special education needs to be reconceptualized as a support to the regular education classroom, rather than as "another place to go." Recent research suggests what is so wrong about special education is the stigma and isolation that result from being removed from the regular education class for so long. We now have the effective strategies to bring help to the student rather than removing the student from the enriching setting of the regular education class.

- *Children, unlike adults, often are positive about inclusion.* While adults tend to have anxieties about inclusion (perhaps because it so contradicts our training and assumptions), children without disabilities generally have very positive feelings about helping peers who need assistance.

When asked why adults sometimes assume they may not

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support each other, children often say, "It's because adults don't trust us to do the right thing."

Our repeated experiences at LADSE assure us that students of all ages are more likely than not to "do the right thing." Indeed, students are able problem solvers and contribute to designing new strategies that facilitate successful learning outcomes for their peers with disabilities.

Often we are reminded the real experts about 8-year-old behavior are 8-year-old children. We would do well to rely more on children when we are seeking new strategies to motivate or enhance learning for their peers with challenges.

Administrative Commitment

- *You must be committed to listening to teachers.* Teachers who are concerned that inclusion could become another way to simply "dump" students in regular education settings without support may be right given a lack of administrative commitment.

To be done well, inclusion requires commitment at every level to the principle that children with disabilities can learn within the regular classroom given proper supports, and an unswerving commitment by administrators and the school board that resources will be reallocated to assure appropriate support to the regular education classroom.

Ironically, resources usually are readily available. We now better

understand the high cost associated with segregated pullout program models, especially those associated with busing students outside their neighborhood school.

Teachers need to be given absolute, unqualified commitments that children and teachers will be supported by reallocating dollars currently spent on sometimes poor service models to better ones with regular education classrooms.

- *You must acknowledge the important role special educators play as consultants and team teachers.* Regular education teachers clearly understand this. They appreciate the important role of special educators if inclusion is to be successful.

Again, "place" is the issue. Special educators can work effectively in the regular education classroom with other teachers, thereby enriching educational opportunities for all students.

- *Inclusion provides reciprocal benefits for all students.* While the benefits of inclusion for children with disabilities have been emphasized because of the irreplaceable impact that contact with a range of other students provide, we have learned that heterogeneous instructional grouping provides everyone with increased learning opportunities and outcomes.

Special education resources redirected to supporting regular classrooms that include students with disabilities provide all students with additional instructional supports.

Most of all, the best way to do inclusion is to get involved. Do it! Everyone is a winner.

Dr. Howard P. Blackman, a former member of the President's Committee on Mental Retardation, is the recipient of Exceptional Parent Magazine's 1991 Exemplary Leadership Award.

Surmounting the Disability of Isolation

BY HOWARD P. BLACKMAN

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Our cooperative's motivation to explore the fuller inclusion of students with disabilities within regular education classrooms in their neighborhood schools is aptly captured in Canadian activist Judith Snow's insightful observation that "the only disability is having no relationships."

Repeated and prolonged conversations with parents, and especially our children, helped us to better understand that isolation from peers who can both contribute to and learn from each other is the most disabling condition for children, if not for all people.

Within our cooperative we have learned to replace the question, "Is this intervention good for children with disabilities?" with "Does this intervention make good sense for any child?"

By asking this question, we began questioning the logic (given poor outcomes) of placing students with behavioral or learning difficulties, almost always associated with low self-esteem in the same classroom thereby limiting their opportunities to both learn and model from peers. We began to reexamine the efficacy of homogeneous, or lower-track, classrooms based on disability.

Enlightened Approach

The La Grange Area Department of Special Education, a public school cooperative with 55 schools

in 16 suburban Chicago school districts, has been identified as one of few school cooperatives of its size in the nation that never operated a separate school for children with disabilities. All special education programs in LADSE districts have always been housed in regular public school buildings.

While children with moderate to significant disabilities participate in regular education, they often attend a regular school outside their own neighborhood, thereby limiting the impact of mainstreaming. Only recently did we better appreciate that mainstreaming is supposed to be a means toward an end, the end being better learning opportunities by increased exposure to the richness and diversity of the regular education classroom, leading to opportunities to develop sustained relationships with peers.

While parents value the quality of the instructional programs in regular school buildings and the uncommon dedication of highly skilled special education teachers, they often expressed concern over the absence of friends and relationships in their child's natural environment, i.e., the block, the neighborhood, and at every level of the community. Parents were pained by their children's isolation and loneliness after school and on weekends that were so inevitable since they

frequently did not know any child in the neighborhood.

For many children, the most natural school environment is the neighborhood school. As a colleague recently suggested when reflecting about the differences between mainstreaming (being based in special education setting for a part of the school day) and inclusion (being based in regular education with the opportunity to receive parallel instruction in community-based settings when appropriate), mainstreaming means that you are a visitor, and inclusion makes you part of the family.

Frequently, school districts interested in moving toward inclusion seek out "how to" information from others with implementation experience. For understandable reasons, inclusion programs resist boiler plate, pre-packaged approaches. Inclusion must consider the educational needs of the particular resident students being served in other schools as well as the needs of staff, how the students are currently grouped for instruction within the school, the culture of the school, and myriad of the other neighborhood school conditions that differ from school to school.

Yet there are learning strategies that facilitate successful inclusion. Expanding the capacity of the neighborhood school and regular education classroom to meet the needs of more students who learn