

Creating an Inclusive Classroom Culture

Most educators agree that a predictable, safe school environment provides a setting where students can make friends; observe positive, pro-social behaviors from others; and become part of the classroom community. Especially where inclusion is involved, teachers are charged with establishing a climate of trust and fairness, anticipating discipline problems and intervening, managing the instructional environment, and using specific intervention techniques when discipline problems occur (McLeskey & Waldron, 2000).

Assumptions and Approaches to Teaching Disabled Students

Despite having the necessary accommodations, some students may still feel alienated from the rest of their class. According to research, a significant factor contributing to their lack of membership is that many of the general and special education teachers' assumptions about disabled students and learning remained unchallenged and unchanged, hindering the inclusion process. These assumptions include the following:

- Inclusion students are viewed as irregular, even though they are in regular classes full-time.
- These students need specialized "stuff" none of which can be provided by the classroom teacher.
- The special educator is the officially designated provider of the specialized stuff. (McLeskey & Waldron, 2000, pp. 70–71)

Here are some approaches to teaching students with disabilities that facilitate inclusion so that all students become true members of the class:

- Emphasize the students' strengths—not just to the disabled students, but to the whole class.
- Avoid favoritism; most of the time, a student's disability does not warrant extra attention.
- Alter your expectations for students with disabilities, but make sure to continue to hold high expectations.
- Make accommodations only when the need arises.
- Give yourself ample time to develop a relationship and build trust with the student.
- Make sure all students understand the disabilities that some students in the class have and emphasize that sometimes their behavior may seem unusual or unexpected.
- Reinforce that a student's poor behavior does not mean that the student is not a good person. Every person has value.

Class Participation

Children with disabilities need to feel they are members of the class. Friendships among students have a large effect on whether a student is fully integrated into a classroom. “Students with disabilities are more likely to make friends with others if they are active participants in the learning and social community of the classroom” (McLeskey & Waldon, 2000, p. 103). Inclusion is ineffective if the students receive an appropriate education but still feel alienated. It is important to provide ample opportunities for them to both socially and academically interact in the class. Even a student with severe disabilities can participate in small groups in spite of having different assignments from her peers. The following provide some strategies for improving class participation:

- **Accommodation for diversity.** Because a range of differences exists in any classroom, it is helpful to accommodate diversity among all students. Instead

of organizing the class based on skill level, structure it to accommodate the many different ways students learn. Focus on providing differentiated instruction rather than following a one-size-fits-all model. Make differences an ordinary and natural part of the classroom. For example, a small group made up of diverse students might work together to create a presentation about a short story they read in class. The students who are strong in presentation skills can be responsible for telling the story to the class, while others who are strong in art and spatial skills can make the props or posters used during the presentation.

- **Affiliation with others like themselves.** It can be useful to provide disabled students opportunities to interact with other children who have disabilities so they can share their experiences. This can be done through curricular or extracurricular activities and can help build their sense of community. Follow the students' lead to see what they need and provide them with choices—for example, who they'll meet with, what they'll do together, when and where they'll meet, and so on. Be careful to avoid using affiliation as a reason for segregating students.

Social and Behavioral Needs

Oftentimes, students with disabilities have difficulty socializing with their peers. Depending on the disability, some students may not have common social skills that are exhibited in other students their age. For example, many students with autism spectrum disorder cannot read facial expressions and therefore seem to behave in ways that are inappropriate to a certain situation. Other students with disabilities may tend to isolate themselves and require encouragement to interact with classmates.

Many students, not just those with special needs, can benefit from social skill instruction. Although many adults assume that students come to school with developmentally appropriate social skills, research shows that an estimated 10

percent of the school-age population have difficulties in this area (McLeskey & Waldron, 2000).

Explicit instruction in social skills and participation in peer mediation activities have been shown to improve all students' capabilities to interact successfully with their peers and win social acceptance. (Note: Further discussion about teaching social skills occurs in another reading in this module, "Promoting Adolescents' Prosocial Behavior," by Yael Kidron and Steve Fleischman.) Consider the following when planning social and behavioral skills instruction for special education students:

- **Behavior management plan.** Is a clear and effective behavior management system in place? Will the classwide system work for this student, or does she need a special behavior management plan? Will self-monitoring work for targeted behaviors?
- **Skill training.** Does the student need to be taught specific skills? Does the student need counseling?
- **Peer modeling.** Can peers be used to monitor and model behaviors? Can peers provide mentoring, tutoring, or assistance to the student?
- **Collaborative interaction.** Can this student collaborate with other students? How can collaborative interactions be designed to include this student in the class?

Including all students in the academic community of the classroom is important. According to McLeskey and Waldron (2000), teachers need to create a classroom culture that promotes positive behaviors, teaches students about disabilities, provides social skills instruction, and ensures that students have opportunities to build friendships. Furthermore, a truly inclusive classroom is one where students have many opportunities and supports that allow them to become active participants in the social community.