

A photograph of a classroom scene. A teacher, a woman with blonde hair wearing a white shirt, is leaning over a desk to assist a young student. The student is wearing a white shirt and has a white cane resting on the desk. Other students are visible in the background, some sitting at desks. The overall atmosphere is one of focused learning and support.

# Key Elements To Building An Inclusive School

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# Key Elements To Building An Inclusive School

Throughout the world, educators are seeking ways to create schools that promote justice and enhance the learning and performance of all children. They are discovering that old patterns of segregating students by race, gender, culture, language, and ability model oppression, reduce effective learning, and prevent the development of relationships among diverse children. Innovative and concerned educators are seeking to create *inclusive schools* where diversity is valued and children of great differences learn together. This short paper outlines key elements necessary for building inclusive schools. These strategies have been developed out of comprehensive literature review and the Whole Schooling Research Project.

## 1. Include All students in learning together.

The school and staff together make a commitment that all students should be welcomed into the school and that teachers and other staff will work to have inclusive classes, heterogeneously grouped where students who are gifted through severely disabled learn, play, and work together.



For this to occur and become part of the culture of the school, the total staff must be committed to this as a value for children, be able to articulate the reasons for their belief, be willing to defend this practice against detractors, and be willing to struggle, learn, and seek answers when it doesn't seem to be working for a particular child.

In most schools, this will mean a shifting special education, gifted, at risk, and other students from separate classes into general education; identifying the students who are presently in separate special education, gifted, or other schools who would typically attend our school and invite them back; and redesigning the role of specialists to provide support for inclusive teaching (see below).

*We would not see* children in ability groups in class or children with special needs (learning disabilities, gifted, etc.) clustered in general education classes.

## 2. Multi-level, authentic instruction for learners of diverse abilities.

Schools are typically structured along grade levels and teach using standardized materials as if all children in a particular grade were at the same level. The reality, however, is that any class, whether attempting to be inclusive or not, contains children functioning at 3-6 grade levels apart.

Inclusive schools, and the teachers and staff within them, embrace this diversity of ability and make it part of the design of instruction. Rather than designing instruction around a narrow span of abilities, inclusive teachers design their teaching intentionally allowing for students to be at multiple levels of ability. The idea, however, is not to 'make it easier for those kids who aren't at grade level'. Rather, inclusive teachers . . .

- ❑ Design lessons at multiple levels
- ❑ That challenge students at their own level (zone of proximal development)
- ❑ Provide support and scaffolding so children can push ahead to their own next level of learning.
- ❑ Using authentic teaching strategies that engage children in learning via activities that relate to their lives at home and in the community, that connect to the real world
- ❑ Engaging the multiple intelligences and learning styles of children so that multiple pathways for learning and demonstrating achievement are available.
- ❑ Involving students in collaborative, pair or group work where they draw on each other's strengths.

Schools in which teachers teach in this way have few children whose needs are not met. However, since staff are constantly learning, never getting it quite right all the time, there will often be children for whom teaching is not working. Staff then figure a range of *adaptations* to the curriculum, paying attention to what works and how this might be incorporated next time into an overall teaching strategy.

### 3. Build community and meet the needs of children with behavioral challenges.

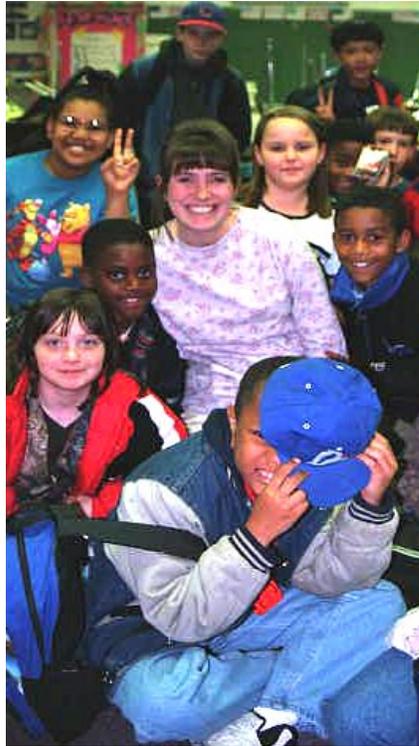
For children's minds to work well so that they learn, they must feel safe, secure, cared for. When they don't learning diminishes or ceases. Therefore, building community in the school is critical. This involves many dimensions:

- ❑ Collaborative, supportive, respectful relationships among staff, parents, the community – study groups, school teams that focus on different issues, team teaching, etc.

- ❑ Building structures in the classroom among children so they know one another help one another – peer partners, circles of support, peacemakers (a program for conflict resolution where children are taught to resolve conflicts among one another under teacher supervision and guidance), sharing of lives and feelings in talk, writing, the arts, class meetings, and more.

- ❑ Giving children choices and teaching them responsibility for choices – for example, children going to the bathroom on their own (rather than a whole group lined up), selecting among several classroom activities, allowing students to sit, stand, move around, lay on the floor, etc, as they study or work together.

In such a school, 'behavior problems' are much less frequent. Children feel cared for, have choices., do not feel constrained, and yet are intentionally taught responsibility in the process. However, given the problems children have in their lives, students will still cause problems and staff seek to respect children and develop proactive solutions.



Rather than viewing children as needing to be 'controlled', teachers understand that all behavior communicates a message. When a child 'acts out', this is his or her way of telling staff about something they need. The challenge is to help figure out what that need is and to help them learn alternative strategies for meeting it. Glasser's described five needs of human beings that can provide a way to understand children: (1) survival, (2) love and belonging, (3) power, (4) fun, (5) freedom. Most often, schools ignore many of these needs and actually *create behavior problems* in their attempt to thwart children having these needs met. The goal in an inclusive school is to create a school culture and specific strategies that help students meet their

needs in positive ways. But what do staff in an inclusive school DO? Here are some simple but powerful steps.

Step 1: Clarify the behavior that is a problem. It's also helpful to figure out *why* the behavior is *considered* a problem. Are rules too rigid? Are children treated poorly so that they are responding in kind? What can be done to help meet Glasser's Five Needs?

Step 2. Why is the behavior occurring? What need does the behavior signal? These are the questions underlying a good 'functional assessment'. They are critical for only by answering them do we understand the child and develop a way to meet needs. Other parts of this may involve analysis of the following questions: What occurs before, during, and after the problematic behavior? What is going on in the child's life?

Step 3. Develop strategies to meet the needs of the child in more positive ways. Develop these ideas *with* the child. Help the child to understand that the behavior is not good, we understand and care, but there are other ways he can get what he needs. Develop an action plan, do it, evaluate it.

Step 4. Evaluate how well the change worked. How do we know? Traditionally, we know an intervention worked if the problematic behavior went away. In this case, the strategies only worked *if the needs of the child were met*. Who determines this? The child.

School staff can do other things to deal with problematic behavior in a positive way. Some of these include:

- ❑ Dialogue and joint planning with the parents.
- ❑ Create a room where the child can go, under supervision, when he 'needs a break' to deal with emotional stress. This can be the library, a support room, a secluded place in the class (like under the teacher's desk).
- ❑ Build social support for the child. Get a circle of support together of classmates who together plan with the child and

teacher, using MAPS for example, how to help him or her.

- ❑ Do a "Meeting Needs Audit" of the total school to determine how well the school is meeting the five needs identified by Glasser for children in the building. Develop a range of activities that may address discrepancies.



#### 4. Provide support for teachers.

Supporting teachers in working with students at multiple ability levels, who have emotional and social challenges in their lives is critical. This is particularly important as the shift towards building an inclusive culture in the school is occurring. Teachers who are used to trying to teach at only one level have difficulty figuring out how to teach at multiple levels. Even teachers who do this well sometimes don't know that they do or what is multi-level and what is not.

A range of specialists are available to most schools to deal with special needs and problems of children – social workers, special education teachers, bilingual teachers, psychologists, nurses, occupational therapists, speech therapists, and others. In a traditional school, most of these people work on their own with limited consultation with others and pull children out of class for various services.



In an inclusive school, however, specialists work to support the general education classroom teacher. Further they work as a *team*.

Special education teachers play an important role in an inclusive school. How this role develops, however, can vary dramatically depending upon philosophy and purpose. Four roles are emerging out of research related to in-class special education support by teachers and aides.

1. Remediation or enrichment – the goal is to ‘fix’ the child or ‘enrich’ the child’s experience, often in pull-out classes or one on one work in the back of the general education class;
2. Adapting – teaching strategies are not questioned and if the ability of the child does not match requirements, curriculum adaptations are developed – eg. different worksheets, less work, more time to do work.
3. Inclusive, multi-level, authentic teaching. Here the support teacher and general education teacher work together to design lessons that engage children at multiple levels.
4. Teacher need. In this situation, a support teacher provides assistance to the teacher in strengthening or areas of relative need in the teacher’s repertoire. This might include helping the teacher

to learn skills in literacy, science by developing a lesson and teaching it.

In quality inclusive schools, we put our focus on #'s 2 and 3. #1 has little place. #2 will be needed little as teachers learn how to teach starting from children’s present abilities and strengths. In this way of working we might see:

- ❑ The support team meeting weekly together to talk about children with special problems and needs and brainstorm together how to deal with the issue.
- ❑ Scheduled meetings at least every two weeks between the general education teacher and the specialists who are providing support in the classroom to develop plans on teaching together and address concerns of specific children.
- ❑ Special education teachers (Inclusive Support Teachers) assigned to several rooms where they collaborate with teachers. When we observe the room we would see the teacher or aide working with all the students in the class while assuring that the students with special needs were receiving the help they need. The special education and general education teacher would work together with each taking responsibility for all students.
- ❑ General education teacher along with specialists – special education teacher, aide, speech therapist, social worker – working together with small groups of children who are working on different projects – centers, inquiry projects, and more.

*We would NOT see.*

- ❑ An aide at the back of the class with a student with a disability,
- ❑ An aide or teacher sitting constantly with a student with a disability clearly working only with him.
- ❑ Students in ability groups working with the special education teacher.
- ❑ A student with special needs separated from the rest of the class.

## 5. Partner with parents.

Parents of children with special needs have typically gone through much with their children. In traditional schools, these parents receive much negative feedback from the school. Their children are rejected and 'sent away' to special education classes or separate schools.

In an inclusive school, however, we turn this around by:

- ❑ Parents are *immediately* invited to have their children in inclusive classes.
- ❑ Meeting with and listening carefully to what parents have to tell us about their children. We seek to understand the child's gifts, strengths, and needs, strategies that work, and interests of the child from the parent.
- ❑ Welcoming their child into our classes. We communicate that we want their child in our school and obtain their input for his or her educational plan.
- ❑ Invite the parent into the school and class. Make them welcome and a part of the school family and community.
- ❑ Insure that they are involved in the full life of the school.

*We would NOT see:*

- ❑ Parents who must fight to have their children included in general education classes in the school.
- ❑ Separate PTA for parents of children with special needs.
- ❑ Special nights just for children with special needs. They will be fully included in any after school program or activity.

- ❑ Teachers sending constant negative notes home to children without balancing this with positive communications.

## 5. Decision-making and leadership: Leadership, Democracy, and Empowerment.

Given the amount of segregation in our society based on race, class, culture, and ability, it is not surprising that building an inclusive school is a very challenging task.

What is critical in this process are these three elements that must be at the foundation of the decision making process of the school.



**Leadership.** An inclusive school is first and foremost built on a vision of what is good for children. Staff of inclusive schools care more about children than about their place and power in the school bureaucracy, their salary raise this coming year. These are important, of course. The needs of staff are critical. Yet, all is driven by a vision of what helps children.

**Democracy.** School leadership must be foremost in helping to impel a vision for children ahead. However, all school staff, parents, and children themselves must have a voice in creating an inclusive culture in a school if it is to survive.

**Empowerment.** Similarly, all in the school must be empowered to take action to make the vision of an inclusive school real. Power must not only be in the 'office' and principal, but all work towards this goal.