

Creating Inclusion in the Classroom: Lessons Learned from UNF KIDS' Head Counselor

Coming from a long line of teachers, I had always imagined myself joining the profession. My mother has worked as a primary teacher for the past 21 years. Her mother spent her life as a high school teacher in Slovakia, and my fathers' mother taught special education in Toronto. Working in education seemed like a rational step for me. I was always a strong student and enjoyed the community aspect of the institution. I thought that my proclivity for learning could be transferred down to the next generation. It seemed simple.

However, immersing myself in the educational landscape has taught me about the complexities behind my role. I had spent years in my mothers' classrooms, watching her shower her students with compassion and love. She poured her heart and soul into her work, teaching by day, marking by night and planning throughout the weekend. I was aware of the workload and ready to take on the overtime hours, however, my biggest hurdle was to be able to teach like my mother and create lessons that not only reached each student but provided meaningful learning opportunities, regardless of skill level.

When I was in school there was such emphasis and importance placed on test scores. Throughout my entire life, academic achievement was what drove me, and it became how I measured my own success. Going into the field, my goal as a teacher reflected this. I aimed to teach the curriculum so impeccably and in such an engaging way that my students would score high and be successful. It seemed like a pragmatic and straightforward equation. A student, plus a well-done lesson, equaled success.

Once I entered the classroom, I realized the intricacies and unique schemas behind each student. Sure, my idealized vision of teaching a fantastic lesson to a group of eager to learn students worked in theory, but it couldn't be farther from reality. The crucial flaw was assuming that each student is starting on an equal playing field. That each child is coming into school in the morning well-rested, fed and free of outside stress. It assumed that each student is getting the same supports from home, whether it be an after-school tutor, available parents, and access to extracurricular activities. By generalizing children as all the same I was trivializing their individual struggles and experiences, ignoring their barriers to success. I needed to be more inclusive and find what each student needs to be successful.

One strategy that I have learned on my journey to being an inclusive teacher is that you must create material that can cross multiple learning styles. Through the incorporation of multiple modalities, students can engage in different skills and senses as they learn. For example, a lesson that allows students to explore the material through speaking, drawing, listening and writing provides four separate possibilities to strengthen comprehension (Kaplan, 2019). In addition, studies have found that seeing information presented in a multitude of ways, for example, as an image and text, can make it easier for students to remember the lesson (Terada, 2017; 2018). This ensures that children with various learning styles and students on the spectrum can learn the material and show their knowledge in a way that works best for them (Bennett et al., 2019). Of course, students will gravitate towards their preferred modality and choose to ignore others however, by providing different options, teachers are creating an inclusive learning environment for each student's unique needs.

A second strategy for creating an inclusive education is through the differentiation of instruction. Differentiation involves modifying lessons to meet the needs of all students, whether it be changing the environment the student works in, the content, the process, or the final product. For example, if students are reading articles on animals, we can differentiate by providing

readings and discussion questions that are at a variety of reading levels. This can even be done when creating formative and summative assessments. Instead of having the entire class complete the same standard task, provide a variety of options, for example, allow students to choose between writing an essay, creating a PowerPoint, or designing an informative poster with a short accompanying writeup. Each task would skill cover the same targets set in the rubric; however, students now have autonomy over their learning by being able to pick what task best shows their knowledge. This can be highly beneficial for both teachers and students, as an OISIE study (2010) discovered that teachers who differentiated instruction created more meaningful tasks that provided richer assessment data. Also, they reported higher student engagement, an overall shift towards a student-centred learning approach, and found that collaboration and teamwork were emphasized, two fundamental aspects of 21st-century learning (Iafrate et al., 2010).

Inclusion can seem like a daunting task. But it just requires time to think. Be reflective and think about how you can improve. As you prepare your lessons ask yourself some questions. Am I creating something meaningful that will reach each one of my students? Can everyone complete this task? Have I provided sufficient resources? Does each student have the skills to solve this? Is it manageable? Have I challenged them enough? And most importantly, is anyone being left out?

I came into the field with my own biases, thinking little of the big picture, however, working with children taught me what is truly important. Of course, we are here to lay the foundation and ensure our children are prepared for the next grade level. However, we are also here to nurture their emotional, social, and mental growth. It is our duty to create an environment for each student to be at their best and feel comfortable enough to take learning risks. Whether that means re-examining our teaching style or experimenting with assessments, it is important to stay open to new pedagogies and incorporate multiple avenues for learning.

I think a lot about what I want to achieve as a teacher and how I want to impact my students. What will they remember looking back 20 years from now? Will they remember the 118 elements on the periodic table and the 6 layers of soil? Or will they remember the feeling of being welcomed and supported? Did the classroom feel safe, accepting and inclusive? Or did students feel anxious and overwhelmed during lessons? I am far from the teacher I want to be, but slowly as I learn and incorporate more ideas into my classroom, I believe I will get there, and throughout that journey, I will support my students no matter what.

Resources

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