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## **There is No Place Called Inclusion**

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It is not unusual to hear professionals discuss inclusion in terms of inclusive students, inclusive classrooms, or inclusive schools. Unfortunately, these terms lend to the confusion surrounding inclusion. Inclusion is not a student, a classroom, or a school. Rather, inclusion is a belief that ALL students, regardless of labels, should be members of the general education community. As members of the general education community, students with and without disabilities should have access to the full range of curriculum options. This means, for example, that students without disabilities should be able to utilize resource rooms without receiving a label first. It also means that students with disabilities should have access to typical homerooms, general education classrooms and courses, and school clubs. Those who support inclusion acknowledge that students have diverse learning needs and that the traditional model of education increasingly is not able to accommodate all students. The philosophy of inclusion encourages the elimination of the dual special and general education systems, and the creation of a merged system that is responsive to the realities of the student population.

Today, the controversy over the appropriateness of inclusion for students with autism spectrum disorders continues. Much of this controversy is based on diverse interpretations of the law and of current thinking. However, several basic premises behind the concept of inclusion are often overlooked in these discussions. First, students with and without disabilities do not fall into neat categories of educational need. Stating that a student has autism, Asperger's syndrome, or other pervasive developmental disorders does not paint an exact picture of the supports or services needed. It was never the intent of either federal law (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) or state regulations to base curriculum and placement decisions on categorical labels. The law clearly states that programming and placement must be individually determined. Second, the least restrictive environment mandate shows a clear preference for educating students with autism spectrum disorders and other disabilities in general education settings. The law articulates that students must receive needed supports and services within the context of the regular classroom. When these accommodations are insufficient to insure educational success, then students can be placed in more restrictive settings. However, the responsibility is placed on the school to show that sufficient and appropriate resources were accessed and were unsuccessful in supporting a student's education in a regular classroom setting. Finally, the law states that students must have the opportunity to interact with nondisabled peers. Clearly, segregated settings do not promote these opportunities and place teachers in the position of having to create artificial options.

Unfortunately, the debate about the benefits of inclusion versus segregation misses one critical point. Neither general education nor special education settings are inherently good. Placement in a general education setting does not mean that a student is learning valuable information. And segregation does not equal quality programming. The failure of students with autism spectrum disorders in general education settings can be attributed to strategies and classroom structures that make learning difficult for all students. It is clearly time to get past the arguments surrounding inclusion and focus our efforts on teaching students what they need to know and in a manner that is effective. Interestingly, these are the same concerns expressed by the general education community. In reality, inclusion is not a special education issue. For schools to successfully support students with diverse learning needs, special education reform must be viewed within the broader context of school restructuring. Schools, which are focused on improving outcomes and on preparing students without disabilities for meaningful and productive lives are in a better position to address the needs of students with disabilities. In other words, good schools are good schools for all. And good teachers are good teachers for any student. It is within the context of global school restructuring activities that educators can better focus their efforts on supporting students with autism spectrum disorders in gaining maximum educational benefit from the general education setting. Below are a few recommendations to guide these efforts.

First, educators need training. Too often, teachers are presented with students for whom they are unprepared to teach. Information is important since individuals with autism can seem a paradox of strengths and weaknesses, and many develop false perceptions of these individuals. At a very basic level, teachers will need to know the primary characteristics associated with autism spectrum disorders. While it is important to ensure that information is not stigmatizing to the



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student, teachers need to know about any areas of difficulty, special talents, and other important information. In addition to receiving up-front information, the instructional team needs time to meet to problem solve strategies and to address concerns. When teachers do not receive information and support, both students and teachers are set up for failure.

Decisions to consider all students as members of the school community must be made by the entire school community with support from key administrators. When administrators are not supportive of students' participation in the school community and the changes this requires, teachers are placed in the position of bargaining for every bit of assistance. In addition, parents must spend time each year working aggressively with the school to ensure continued success. Schools, which systematically accept and support all students are better prepared to support students with autism, Asperger's, and pervasive developmental disorders.

When choosing courses in which to involve students, consider areas of interest and situational demands (e.g., open spaces, lighting). When building a schedule, it may be helpful to intersperse easy and difficult coursework, or allow students to spend certain parts of the school day in a smaller classroom area. In all cases, make sure students experience some successes during the school day. If the demands of the school day become too intense, it may be necessary to provide the student with a safe area in which to escape. Some may learn best when exercise or physical activity are available throughout the day.

The trend toward educating students with autism spectrum disorders in local neighborhood schools requires the adoption of innovative and flexible instructional strategies to ensure that educational objectives are met and that students are supported across a diverse array of educational settings. Innovative strategies such as multi-age grouping, cooperative learning, authentic assessment, instruction which acknowledges the concept of multiple intelligences, differentiated instruction, thematic approaches, whole language instruction, and other innovations found in the general education community present a positive framework for teaching students with autism spectrum disorders.

Peer support programs are another innovation used to ensure that students get the maximum benefit from their school day. Peers are a natural and readily available resource for supporting students with learning difficulties in general education settings. Research and practical experience indicate that students learn best from each other. Students will often get together in a study group. Students who are doing well in a subject area often help friends who are struggling to prepare for an exam. Some schools have building-wide programs in which tutoring and cooperative learning are established practice, and students change roles between tutor and tutee as the situations demands. Clearly peer support programs can serve as a critical resource for any student who is challenged by some aspect of the school curriculum.

Students must receive an adequate level of support during the school day. While peer support programs provide one mechanism for support, instructional assistants provide another. Assigned assistants will need information on providing instruction in a manner that is easily understood by students. It is helpful if instructional assistants are not always closely positioned next to the student. Rotating assistants and positioning assistants away from the student are important strategies for avoiding cue dependency. While different assistants can be used, adopted strategies must be consistent. Allow instructional assistants time with the team to discuss approaches that work and those that do not.

The general education setting can be less stressful if students are provided with information about expectations and rules. In most cases, this information should be presented in a written format so that the student can rehearse at his or her own pace, and refer to it as needed or when under added stress. Provide students with visual supports to assist with following a daily schedule, identifying classmates, completing homework assignments, getting to class prepared, and using self-control.

Many voice a concern about whether inclusion can work. Success stories from around the country provide testimony that students across the autism spectrum can learn in general education settings if students' time is wisely used, sufficient support is provided, all are informed, and proven methods of instruction are adopted. If all these factors are addressed, implementing an educational program, which reflects the philosophy of inclusion, can prepare young people with autism spectrum disorders to be members of a place called community.



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