

WHY INCLUSION BEGINS IN KINDERGARTEN...Or Doesn't

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BECAUSE EVERY CHILD DESERVES A CHANCE TO LIVE LARGE: INCLUSIVE EDUCATION MEANS GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Parents and professionals must practice having great expectations for all children. Expectations for learning are sometimes lowered due to a desire to protect kids if they learn or look different than other students. As a result, parents and teachers may unconsciously limit chances for kids and the kids may be “living down” instead of “living up” to our expectations. Maintaining low expectations for kids does not preserve their dignity: having great expectations for children affords them dignity, challenges our perceptions and gives us new problems to solve.

We must constantly guard against protecting our own perceptions of what kids can do, be, or learn. We must take care that we do not invest more in protecting our comfortable perceptions than in giving children many chances and choices.

BECAUSE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FROM THE START MEANS INCLUSION IN THE FUTURE: THE ROAD IS CHOSEN EARLY

We need to begin including kids with labels in kindergarten because by placing them in a given setting, we are setting expectations for their futures. By choosing one road, we necessarily reject the other. Robert Frost reminds us of the long-term effects of our choices when he says “Two roads diverged in a wood. I took the road less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.”

We must educate kids in learning environments which look like the ones we hope they will live in as adults, because as adults they are likely to live in environments which look like the ones in which they were educated. The adult-life match for segregated elementary education is the institution and the sheltered workshop. By beginning from kindergarten to include kids with labels, we ensure that our children who “get to go” to inclusive schools will, after graduation, “get to go” to real life.

Kids who are included from the start are welcome in their community and aren't forced to depend largely on human service systems for their lifelines. Including all kids with labels in kindergarten builds natural supports for their futures, a process that takes time and shared experience. Being included builds natural supports that will prove critical to their success in community living in the future. Being included with 22 kids in their class means your child is a known and recognized member of a group of kindergartners in the school community. It means that 22 families in that community can interact with her.

In one week, the kid who is included gets many opportunities to make connections in public with families who know and accept her as a kindergartner. These families are excellent community educators, and more effective than any public service announcement. Each time they interact in public with their labeled friend who happens to have disabilities,

they are delivering a clear message to other people that interaction with this person is okay.

BECAUSE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FROM THE START MEANS LOTS OF PEER MODELS

Kids learn from each other. Models for kids in segregated settings are often other students with learning language or behavior difficulties. Constant learning opportunities for kids with labels in regular activities are created by peers in regular classes, at lunch, at recess, in the halls, at assemblies, in P.E., at music, and in the bathroom line.

Kids with labels included in regular activities have access to different peers in many contexts throughout each day. In typical educational settings, students with labels have as many as 22 learning peers, and many potential opportunities to see and hear those peers engaging, with various degrees of success, in social or academic learning. Peers provide models as they react to and interact with each other, teachers, materials, and information. Even the most talented, dedicated special education teacher with the most innovative materials and equipment is unable to provide these models in a setting exclusively for students with disabilities.

BECAUSE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FROM THE START MEANS EVERYBODY WINS

All children benefit from sharing educational experiences with each other, no matter what their needs or labels. It seems sensible to allow children those benefits from the beginning, especially kids with labels who may need more time to take advantage of those benefits.

Kids without labels also benefit when kids with labels are included in regular settings from the beginning of their educational careers. They benefit directly when they are allowed to be peer tutors. When we use students as peer tutors, or learning sharers, we provide the tutor an opportunity to process learned information in a new way, a sense of mastery and accomplishment and reinforcement for the value in helping others.

If kids are classmates from kindergarten throughout their schooling, with good modeling from teachers, regular kids will come to expect and will have many opportunities to practice re-explaining, adapting, and trying various ways to get kids with labels to participate or partially participate in learning activities. They come to expect modifications and accept it as routine. All children must be prepared to cope with different learning styles and abilities of coworkers in the adult work world.

Kids without disability labels, although we do not think of this often, will grow to be the neighbors, community members (doctors, grocers, dentists, mechanics, shop owners, church members, hobby and club members), legislators, and most of all PARENTS of kids with disabilities.

Kids with labels, who are segregated for learning purposes, are often not seen by their peers as learners. They are seen only as recess goers or lunch eaters, largely as passive, rather than active participants in school life. When kids with labels are included in regular

education settings, other kids see them actively engaged in the process of learning. The kids with labels get validated with the status of “learner”, and the kids without labels get a new perception of labeled kids as contributors. This perception can carry through to adulthood, giving a long-term, two-way benefit.

Special education teachers can benefit from delivering instruction in regular environments. In inclusive settings, teaching is no longer a matter of making something happen, but more a matter of turning each ongoing activity into a learning opportunity by finding ways to involve kids with labels. Teachers learn to orchestrate, facilitate, and arrange for learning to happen; they teach kids with labels to be learners, rather than to do learning activities. In this scenario, everybody wins.

BECAUSE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FROM THE START MEANS FRIENDSHIPS

True friendship is immeasurably important in each of our lives. All of us need opportunities to develop friendships and relationships in schools and community environments. Friendship is a commodity that transcends labels. The best reason to begin fostering those relationships in kindergarten is that it is easy. It makes including kids throughout their school experience easier, and it increases the likelihood that children will form lasting friendships. Kindergarten kids don’t know the meaning of labels. Children accept each other until they are taught to discriminate and reject. Beginning to include kids with labels in kindergarten allows real, sustainable friendships to develop and to be built on the basis of mutual interest and shared experiences.

Each child has abilities, capacities, and gifts; with guidance and support, each child can contribute to her/his school community. Our responsibility is to nurture each child in developing these capacities. A school is a dynamic community of diverse learners with various gifts, each valuable in its own right. Our job is to model for all students many ways to value each member of the school community.

John McKnight of Northwestern University says, “All communities depend on the capacity of people, on their fullness, on their possibilities, on what they can do—not on what they cannot do—the heart of the community is capacity. If we want to create community, we build on capacity, not needs and deficits.”

Schools can embrace the value that all children belong from the beginning. All schools can develop the commitment and expertise necessary to meet the unique needs of all children in regular education classes and provide the supports and services needed for each child to become a valued, contributing member of the school community.

Each year that we don’t close the door on segregated placements as an option for kindergartners, another set of kindergarten students miss critical, lifelong benefits, such as great expectations, peer modeling, functional learning, and friends. What are we waiting for?