

# Practical Strategies

for elementary school

# INCLUSION



june  
stride



IEP

RESOURCES

**Practical Strategies for  
Elementary School Inclusion**

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# 1

## What Is Inclusion?



### **AN UNEXPECTED CHALLENGE**

Teresa was puzzled by her mixed feelings and unease about beginning a new career as an elementary school teacher. She had weighed carefully the pros and cons of giving up her lucrative, but highly frustrating, job in the business world to become a teacher. She thought she had resolved all the issues. She loved children and wanted her efforts to make a difference. She said to herself that perhaps her current anxiety was just normal new job jitters. But as she replayed the recent conversation with Mr. Roberts, her new boss and principal of Pine Street Elementary, she thought not.

It had happened yesterday when Mr. Roberts and Teresa were sharing a quiet pre-school “get to know each other” conversation in his office, discussing teaching procedures and her responsibilities. After a tour of the school, including a peek into her classroom, he had suggested that she might feel more comfortable if they reviewed her class roster of 24 fourth graders. Teresa readily agreed.

Teresa asked: “Can you give me any helpful insights? As you can imagine, I am anxious to begin preparing myself mentally for Monday.”

Mr. Roberts ran his finger down the list, stopping to comment on each name. "George is a charmer, bright, helpful and considerate. Tomas is a small, shy boy, a loner who so far has rarely contributed in class. Angelique has been a handful, but considering the number of foster homes she has been passed through, it's hardly surprising."

Continuing on, Mr. Roberts demonstrated his familiarity with his student body: "And these last four children are classified as students with special needs and will require your closest attention. I know you completed the necessary special education courses to get your certification, so you are familiar with IDEA, IEPs, BIPs and inclusion. You pretty much know what to expect in an inclusion class such as yours."

Teresa smiled but said nothing, feeling a cold clamp of terror grip her. She knew the cause; it was the "I" word. She had not been informed that she would be involved in inclusion. She realized it was her ignorance causing the fear and cared not that philosophers proclaimed that the first sign of wisdom is acknowledging ignorance. She wondered what she had gotten herself into and how she would meet this new challenge.

*"Do teachers actually get assigned to inclusion classes without any preparation or forewarning?"*



Is it possible that teachers, principals and school districts are still unprepared for inclusion? Do teachers actually get assigned to inclusion classes without any preparation or forewarning? Can it be possible that teachers such as Teresa are quite terror stricken with the prospect of teaching in an inclusion setting? After all, how hard can it be to teach elementary school children, even special needs children? Any dummy can do it, right? And look at all the perks: Health insurance, short days, long vacations, all holidays and the whole summer off!

Sure, you know the drill. People hear you are an elementary school teacher and think you barely have to work to collect a paycheck. Their envy becomes painfully obvious as they remark about how nice it is for you to have such an easy job.

The truth is that most teachers entered the teaching profession for the same reason Teresa did, to make a

**bottom line**



Let inclusion be an opportunity for, not an obstacle to, better teaching.

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difference by helping children learn. Foremost in their minds was not the typical motivators of money and status but rather the satisfaction of knowing their efforts really mattered to a child’s life, to a family and to a society. Also true, many elementary teachers had no idea how all-consuming their responsibilities would be, especially with today’s challenges: trauma caused by split families, children increasingly left to their own devices by working parents, children from many cultures and linguistic backgrounds, new federal and state mandates, demands to attain higher standards, web and media reports of class progress and, lastly, inclusion.

*“School districts must make every effort to provide services that allow students with special needs to be educated in the general education environment.”*

This final challenge—inclusion—is the focus of this book. I hope my experiences, my challenges, my opportunities and, yes, my failures will assist you with your teaching efforts in the inclusion classroom.

## The “I” word

### What is inclusion?

Simply put, educational inclusion means including all children to “the maximum extent appropriate” in the “least restrictive environment” with their nondisabled peers. Inclusion is the opposite of excluding children with special needs to educate them separately. In practical terms, it means that school districts must make every effort to provide whatever services and supports are necessary to allow students with special needs to be educated in the general education environment with their peers. Sometimes inclusion efforts are referred to as “mainstreaming” because the child with special needs enters the general population for education. Sometimes inclusion efforts are also referred to as the Regular Education Initiative (REI) or the General Education Initiative.

### What are the legal aspects of inclusion?

Currently, federal law states that *all* children are entitled to a free and appropriate public education. No, this has not always been the case. In fact, this is a fairly recent American legal mandate, in effect only since 1975 (and one considered

### bottom line



Laws and judicial decisions promote inclusion.

# 6

## Developing an Optimal Learning Environment



**JR. DH**

Darwin, a.k.a. Jr. Dee Hop, seemed always to be in motion, truly a commanding fourth grader on the move. If the class was lining up to go to lunch, you could be certain that Jr. DH, as the kids called him, would be organizing and entertaining as they made their way to the cafeteria. Any outside observer would immediately notice that the class was under the leadership, not of the teacher, but of this slight ball of energy found at the front of the class. Rather than in straight lines, 27 young bodies seemed to be jiving down the hall in waves behind Jr. DH. No, there was not a voice to be heard, but hand signs and dancing feet definitely united the happy group.

Mike Davis, one of the coteachers of this inclusion class, found himself redefining his own teaching role since Jr. DH had naturally taken over the management of the class. Never before had Mike seen one youngster so able to captivate, motivate and bond a group of peers. Admittedly, he found Jr. to be one of the funniest kids he had ever encountered. Additionally, he was astounded with how the students looked forward to each day's lessons,



*“How many teachers have enough strength to allow a student’s natural leadership to help balance discipline and learning?”*

enlivened by the curiosity and responses of Jr. DH. Teaching had become what he always dreamed it might be, a real adventure and a joy, thanks to the classroom atmosphere created by Jr. DH. Further, he and his coteacher, Mrs. Wright, agreed that this was the easiest group of youngsters to teach, even though there were eight special needs students, one of which was Jr. DH.

Nonetheless, Mike Davis and Mrs. Wright had to deal with a number of dilemmas, including the daily trip through the school halls to lunch. They were well aware that the administration felt there should be a traditional decorum marking the progression to the cafeteria. They also realized that, more than likely, their personal classroom management techniques were being scrutinized and probably criticized as well. So be it, they decided. Let the positive academic and behavioral progress of the students serve as their response to criticism.



How many of us have enough personal strength and conviction to allow the natural leadership talent of a student to help us balance discipline and learning in the classroom? Indeed, a student such as Jr. DH is a rare gem, the likes of which you may encounter only once over a long teaching career, and is a poignant reminder that a student with serious special needs can also possess extraordinary gifts. Such a student brings not only a thrill to teaching but confusion to the definition of the teaching role. Should you allow a Jr. the latitude to embrace the class and use your framework to manage the class? Or, should you claim firm control and squelch his ebullient attitude? At what point can such a student, indeed any student, be the fulcrum that provides the balance in a diverse group of learners?

### **bottom line**



Consider personal growth toward improved self-control as part of your classroom management program.

This chapter is devoted to the one topic most teachers feel is the bane of their professional career—classroom management. Working with your collaborators to develop a repertoire of techniques and strategies for dealing with the myriad personalities and attitudes you face can be an eye-opening experience. The process begins with you, with coming to terms with your personality, your self-confidence,

your control issues, your tolerance, your humor and your tenacity. Recognition of all these factors is essential before beginning to determine collaboratively what is acceptable and unacceptable as together your team forges a classroom management plan.

I think most teachers would agree that disciplinary problems get in the way of effective teaching and productive learning. Unfortunately, there is no “one size fits all” strategy for success in managing a classroom of diverse students. There are, however, strategies and techniques that have proven valuable in providing the structure from which to build a management plan appropriate to the styles, personalities and needs of both teachers and students.

Over the years of my professional career, I have been exposed to the advice and techniques of many, many teachers. Thus far, I have concluded that there is no one best management method. What I have come to understand is that a successful discipline program is structured to maximize the time teachers and students share. The message is twofold: (1) Time spent together must be well spent toward clearly defined rigorous academic and behavioral goals, and (2) a shared student-staff commitment to a harmonious, helpful relationship promotes academic and behavioral growth for all. When students and teachers work as a team, together they have a stake in making the team succeed.

### **Developing a framework for inclusion classroom management**

Trial and error can promote powerful learning. During the course of my career, I have had many classroom disciplinary challenges (otherwise known as “problems”). As with most problems we encounter, we have a choice: Stay anchored in the problems or use them as opportunities for growth. For me, I am always anxious to move away from pain! Consequently, I have continually searched for the means to augment my repertoire. Thanks to sharing with and learning from other teachers, conducting research and experimenting day-to-day, I have been able to develop a large repertoire of responses from which to choose. This

#### **bottom line**



The pessimist looks at opportunities and sees difficulties; the optimist looks at difficulties and sees opportunities.—

*Anonymous*

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has allowed me to tailor my response more appropriately to the situation and the student.

## Averting discipline problems

Following are criteria for an effective behavioral management framework that will help avert discipline problems:

1. Always recognize personal worth. Respect engenders respect. The time you spend getting to know each student is invaluable. Time spent allowing students to get to know you and each other at the beginning of the term allows you all to bond, while promoting trust in a safe and accepting environment.

### BRIGHT IDEA

When bad habits are deeply ingrained, they take time to change (indeed, some you may never change). Give students opportunities to practice, to observe positive peer role models and to enjoy praise for appropriateness. Accept that all students may not become model students! If you have neither the training nor the time to deal with serious emotional or aggressive behavior, seek out the school psychologist, a guidance counselor, a talented colleague or an administrator for assistance. Do not be afraid to ask for help.

Mrs. Sharon did not subscribe to this notion. She felt that her role as teacher, the authority, was sufficient to ensure that students would give her respect and do as they were told. Somehow it just doesn't work that way. Not only did Mrs. Sharon disrespect her students with her yelling, grouchy demeanor and unkind comments ("What a

stupid thing to say!" she responded to one fifth grader who remarked that the assignment was confusing), she also disrespected her own peers! When disciplinary problems mounted, she was unable to accept her responsibility for their cause. Instead she always pointed fingers to some student who, she insisted, must be emotionally disturbed!

2. Appreciate diversity of talents, cultural backgrounds, learning styles and interests. Encourage students to acknowledge that although we may look different and learn differently, we all can benefit from each other by sharing our individual gifts. A team attitude of acceptance is paramount.

### bottom line

Teachers who disrespect students, earn student disrespect.

3. Self-control is mandatory. Teachers are the role models; out-of-control teachers can expect an out-of-control classroom. Our very human nature guarantees that at some time, some student, in some way will irritate the heck out of us. Again here is that opportunity to choose—do we retaliate or do we pause and reflect? Needless to say, the professional choice is to reflect and consider options before saying or doing anything. You will find that some of your special needs students may bring unusual and exasperating behaviors into your classroom. Try to use them as personal growth opportunities!
4. Establish and follow routines so students know what to expect. Plan how you will assist students who have difficulty making transitions from one activity to the next.
5. Collaboratively develop and post the classroom rules, stated simply and affirmatively, in a conspicuous place. Preferably, involve the class in determining the essential rules for a positive working classroom environment. When an infraction occurs refer quietly and personally to the number of the rule and suggest a more appropriate behavior. Do not expect all students to immediately conform. Role modeling is most effective. Endeavor to enforce the rules consistently, using appropriate consequences. Be certain that even the adult members of the inclusion team adhere to rules and high performance standards.

*“Endeavor to enforce the rules consistently, using appropriate consequences.”*

Mike was part of a collaborating team, one of the paraprofessionals assigned for two class periods before heading off to another classroom. He was an easygoing, affable young man who was eager to help, but he had two irritating habits: (1) He reported to class just a little late, and (2) he always entered drinking his coffee from the cafeteria. It didn't take long for the students to point out that he was breaking the rules. Indeed, he was. Fortunately he had the good humor to make a learning experience out of it, for himself and the class. If we had not established a strong rapport early on, he may not have been so accepting and the class so open in commenting!

**bottom line**



The only control you have in the classroom is the control you have over yourself.

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6. Do try to remember that rules are in place to promote harmony and student achievement. This assumes that there is a rigorous academic program in place that



### BRIGHT IDEA

Take care to respect the unique needs of all students. Be certain not to use labels or classifications when talking to a student or about a student. Never single out a student, special needs or not, for criticism in front of peers. Try to objectify misbehavior, demonstrating how it interferes with the lesson and personal as well as class progress. Optimally, this means developing a habit of conferencing with any student who is infringing on important classroom rules. The positive result from such demonstrated respect on your part will yield much improved behavior on the student's part.

engages and enthruses all students. It assumes that students know they will be provided with necessary assistance and are expected to perform to the best of their ability, stay on task and encourage others to do the same.

Unplanned, idle time encourages misbehavior.

Charles Devereaux thought he could get by with a few sketchy lesson plans; after all, how hard can it be to

teach fifth grade? Each day he chatted with students about any topic they brought up and then incidentally eased into some sort of lesson that touched on the subject. Students, particularly those with special needs, invariably became restless and talkative, then actively involved in misbehavior. When asked why, they responded: "We aren't learning anything anyway. What does it matter?" Mr. Devereaux responded: "Those special education kids don't belong in here. They're nothing but trouble."

7. Make every effort to be nonjudgmental. Some students are dealing with overwhelming home problems such as alcoholism, drug abuse and abandonment and are doing a better job of coping than we might! Try to separate distress over the behavior from distress over the student. Reinforce acceptable and appropriate behavior while quietly discouraging misbehavior.
8. De-escalate tension and negativism with humor, no matter how corny. Laughter reduces stress for you and for the students. Make it clear that you are not laughing

### bottom line

You grow up the day you have your first real laugh at yourself.—

*Ethel Barrymore*

at someone but at a situation or at yourself. Make each day a new day and a brand new opportunity. Smile. Hold no grudges.

9. Avoid the bait. If you have a student skilled in adversarial techniques who takes pleasure in trying to engage you in argument, opt out. Endless debate is a power struggle that will



**BRIGHT IDEA**

Set aside daily stress-breaking time, working out at the gym, cycling, meditating or doing yoga—whatever allows you a physical outlet and quiet reflective time. These refreshing times will be restorative and improve your effectiveness. Allot a reasonable amount of after-school time for schoolwork, and stick to it! Make it a habit to focus and complete the priority items. You will find that you work smarter and accomplish more.

consume needed instructional time and ultimately serves no positive purpose. Establish, explain and abide by the established classroom structure. Extend an invitation to the student to join you in continuing the discussion after school.

10. Start and end the day with a smile. Make time to greet students by name at the door. Make time at the conclusion of your time together to send them off with a cheerful personal word. Teachers who are liked and respected have far fewer management issues and far greater opportunities for promoting student academic success.
11. Be aware of environmental distractions that divert student attention. Sometimes even oral reading or recitations can stand in the way of a special needs student's ability to focus on assigned work. Take into account student needs, abilities, gender and social skills when designing seating plans or group activities.
12. Consider the performance level of each student, and provide needed curricular modifications. Assignments that are inappropriate to a student's ability level can cause frustration and ultimately to misbehavior.

**bottom line**



You give little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.—  
*Kahlil Gibran*

## Dealing with potentially serious discipline problems

I hate to admit it, but there are times when students will push you to the very limit. Those are the times you most need your personal arsenal of responses to inappropriate, even dangerous, behavior. It only takes one-out-of-control, troubled student to turn your class into a zoo. For that reason I suggest you think carefully about the following suggestions for your own safety and that of those sharing your classroom.

1. Make certain all team members are familiar with the IEPs of the special needs students to ascertain that the plans are being followed. Such things as individual or group

weekly counseling may be written into the plan and offer the student needed relief and help. Remember that the IEP is a legal document. You do not have a choice about following it.

2. Use your classroom timeout area as a cooling off area for any student in need of time to calm down. Make every effort to avoid stigmatizing the special needs student by calling attention to the student or the misbehavior. Generally, the more normal the treatment, the more normal the behavior. Bear in mind that to use a school designated timeout room, the

### LEGAL ALERT

With standards for disciplining special needs students. There is nothing in the law that interferes with a school disciplining a special needs student. Indeed, not to address behavior dangerous to self or others could be cause to claim that the present placement is not an "appropriate educational environment." The recent reauthorization of IDEA reaffirms that schools have a responsibility to provide a safe, violence-free learning environment for all. Consequently, all students must be taught the code of discipline and recognize the consequences for inappropriate behavior.

For special needs students, this means that strategies, supports and interventions must be written into the IEP to address any behavior that impedes learning. If a pattern of problematic behavior develops, the IEP team should determine if modifications to the IEP are necessary. Incidents involving weapons, drug sales or drug use require immediate administrative attention. The administration is responsible for handling such serious issues. Contact them immediately regarding seriously inappropriate behaviors.