NASET LD Report #7

Promoting Positive Social Interactions in an Inclusion Setting for Students with Learning Disabilities

Introduction

If you are working or going to work as either a general education or special education teacher in an inclusion classroom you will be involved a myriad of positive and challenging experiences. None of these will be more rewarding than helping children with special needs develop positive social interactions with their peers.

One of the components of successful of inclusion is the degree to which the student with a disability feels a part of the general education classroom. The feeling of belonging positively affects the student s self-image and self-esteem, motivation to achieve, speed of adjustment to the larger classroom and new demands, general behavior, and general level of achievement. The impact of the new student on the general classroom is a major consideration for inclusion planners. Fostering positive social relationships between students with disabilities and their peers requires the preparation of nondisabled peers in the classroom so that they understand the needs of their new classmates. Teachers may use many strategies to help the student achieve a sense of belonging to the class and school.

One of the most critical things an inclusion classroom teacher must do is establish and maintain a positive and supportive classroom atmosphere. Students are more likely to follow directions, work hard, and exhibit positive classroom behavior when they feel wanted and appreciated by the teacher. This may be especially true of particularly difficult students, who may not trust adults, and who may feel that most teachers are out to get them.

What is Inclusion?

Inclusion involves keeping special education students in general education classrooms and bringing the support services to the child, rather than bringing the child to the support services. Inclusion is a term which expresses commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend. It involves bringing the support services to the child (rather than moving the child to the services) and requires only that the child will benefit from being in the class (rather than having to keep up with the other students). Proponents of inclusion generally favor newer forms of education service delivery (Wisconsin Education Association Council, 2001).

The term inclusion does not appear in federal law or regulations, but its use to refer to the concept of integration of students with disabilities has become standard, and many court cases

use the term. In the literature, one will encounter "inclusion," "full inclusion," "integration," "full integration," "inclusive schools," "inclusive education," and unified system"--all terms used to describe the philosophy and the practices of the full participation of students with disabilities in regular education classrooms (Price, Mayfield, McFadden, and Marsh, 2001)
There seem to be two general approaches to inclusion: inclusion and full inclusion (Price, Mayfield, McFadden, and Marsh, 2001).

Inclusion represents a belief that students with disabilities belong in regular program of the school where special services are available to support the effort.

Full inclusion apparently has two variations:
(a) the belief that special education should be dismantled, and
(b) special education should exist only in the regular classroom. Advocates of full inclusion are sometimes referred to disparagingly as "radical" inclusionists. These approaches form the boundaries of the debate about inclusion. (Price, Mayfield, McFadden, and Marsh, 2001).

Full inclusion means that all students, regardless of handicapping condition or severity, will be in a regular classroom/program full time. All services must be taken to the child in that setting (Wisconsin Education Association Council, 2001).

Principles of Effective Inclusion

According to Salend (2001), there are four principles of effective inclusion:

1. Effective inclusion improves the educational system for all students by placing them together in general education classrooms-regardless of their learning ability, race, linguistic ability, economic status, gender, learning style, ethnicity, cultural background, religion, family structure, and sexual orientation. Inclusionary schools welcome, acknowledge, affirm, and celebrate the value of all learners by educating them together in high-quality, age appropriate general education classrooms in their neighborhood schools.

2. Effective inclusion involves sensitivity to and acceptance of individual needs and differences. Educators cannot teach students without taking into account the factors that shape their students and make them unique. In inclusive classrooms, all students are valued as individuals capable of learning and contributing to society. They are taught to appreciate diversity and to value and learn from each other s similarities and differences

3. Effective inclusion requires reflective educators to modify their attitudes, teaching and classroom management practices, and curricula to accommodate individual needs. In inclusive classrooms, teachers are reflective practitioners who are flexible, responsive, and aware of students needs. They think critically about their values and beliefs and routinely examine their own practices for self-improvement and to ensure that all students needs are met.

4. Effective inclusion is a group effort; it involves collaboration among educators, other professionals, students, families, and community agencies. The support and services that students need are provided in the general education classroom. People work cooperatively, reflectively, sharing resources, responsibilities, skills, decisions, and advocacy for students benefit.

Why are Social Skills Important?

Social competence is the degree to which students are able to establish and maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships, gain peer acceptance, establish and maintain friendships, and terminate negative or pernicious interpersonal relationships. Effective social problem solving requires reading one s own and others feelings, and being able to accurately label and express those feelings. Such skills are aspects of social and emotional learning (Zins, et al., 1998, p. 19).

Well-developed social skills can help youth with disabilities develop strong and positive peer relationships, succeed in school, and begin to successfully explore adult roles such as employee, co-worker/colleague, and community member. Social skills also support the positive development of healthy adult relationships with family members and peers. Hair, Jager, and Garrett (2002) observe that adolescents who have strong social skills, particularly in the areas of conflict resolution, emotional intimacy, and the use of pro-social behaviors, are more likely to be accepted by peers, develop friendships, maintain stronger relationships with parents and peers, be viewed as effective problem solvers, cultivate greater interest in school, and perform better academically (p. 3). Adequate social skills need to be acquired while students are still enrolled in school and further supported and refined in postsecondary, community, and work settings.

Social-Cognitive Skill Development

Social relationships are an important aspect of the learning process and the classroom environment. Research has demonstrated that a significant proportion of students who fail to adjust socially to the classroom environment lack effective social-problem-solving skills. Social problems include:

- poor ability to be empathetic to others perspectives
- poor impulse control
- inability to generate multiple and effective solutions to problems faced in the classroom

Deficiencies in cognitive problem solving skills often lead to emotional and behavioral disorders requiring treatment. The teacher in the inclusive classroom needs to address the social-behavioral domain as well as the academic domain. Research on teaching indicates giving training in social-cognitive skills to youth who are at risk of failure in general education classrooms can improve student s social effectiveness, achieving social goals, and reducing problem behaviors (Kochhar, West and Taymans, 2000)

The Role of Social Skills at School

Gresham, Sugai, and Horner (2001) note that deficits in social skills are key criteria in defining many high-incidence disabilities that hinder students academic progress, such as specific learning disabilities, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), mental retardation, and emotional disturbance (p. 332). Therefore, helping students learn social skills is a proactive approach to minimizing the impact of these types of disabilities on school success.

When social skills are absent, educators cannot fully engage students in a variety of learning experiences, especially those that are cooperative. As inclusion classroom teachers increasingly

use cooperative learning strategies across their curriculum, the need for students to have strong social skills is evident. To participate fully in cooperative learning, some students with disabilities need training in skills such as giving and receiving feedback, listening, and appropriate self-disclosure.

Strategies to Foster a Sense of Belonging in the Inclusion Classroom

Any teacher who has tried to improve a student's social skills knows there are significant challenges to such an endeavor. Problems that interfere with the effectiveness of social skill interventions may include oppositional behavior, conduct problems, negative influences from peer groups, substance abuse, family difficulties, and limited cognitive abilities (Hansen, Nangle, & Meyer, 1998).

Why would students want to improve their social skills? Most likely, they seek to: (a) avoid the negative consequences of inadequate social skills, including loneliness, job loss, or embarrassment at school or work; and (b) enjoy the benefits of having good social skills, such as friendship, acceptance from others, and good relationships at school and work. Nonetheless, students must see the need for the skills being taught. In an inclusion classroom setting, teachers may ask students to identify the social skills necessary for achieving goals important to them. Based on such discussions, students and teachers can jointly select one or two skills to work on at a time.

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Strategies to foster a sense of belonging include (Kochhar, West and Taymans, 2000):

- Discuss expectations with the student s peers and encourage interaction; the school counselor or psychologist can be helpful in preparing classes for a new student with a disability and in discussing the benefits of positive peer relationships
- Use cooperative group learning, in which students are teamed for activities or projects and must cooperate, share ideas and materials, and share in the development of project products. Learning teams are also effective when students are required to prepare for classroom demonstrations and exhibitions
- Assign peer advocates, a peer mentor, or a buddy who is responsible for interacting with and helping the student in classroom activities and social situations. The peer advocate provides support and encouragement and enables the student with a disability to solve problems with class activities and generally adjust to the new classroom environment.
- Assign a teacher advocate to the student, with whom the student can consult for guidance, general support, or crisis assistance.

- Include the new student in the daily roll call and in all class pictures, and place the student's work on the bulletin boards right along with the work of his or her peers
- Establish a lunch-buddy system (particularly helpful for younger students in the first weeks of class).

Creating a Positive Inclusion Classroom Climate

Consistent and effective use of acquired social skills is more likely to occur in inclusion classrooms having a positive social atmosphere. Most adults can think of a situation in which they didn't feel valued and, as a result, did not respond appropriately or compassionately to others. The inclusion classroom can ensure that all students know they are valued and respected members of a learning community by taking the following steps to create a positive school climate (Curtis, 2003):

- Learn and use students' names and know something about each student. This can be difficult in secondary schools; using nametags or assigned seating at the beginning of each term can be helpful.
- Hold daily classroom meetings each morning to help build a sense of community and provide opportunities for conversation among students.
- Provide unstructured time (e.g., recess) when students can practice their social skills with peers and experience feedback.
- Encourage journal writing to improve self-awareness.
- Provide opportunities for students to participate noncompetitively (without tryouts or auditions) in extracurricular activities. Avoid unnecessary competition among students.
- Provide ways for students to provide feedback regarding their experience at school, and show them that their input is taken seriously.
- Make a point of connecting briefly and informally, over a period of several days, with individual students who are having difficulties. This establishes a relationship that will be helpful if the student s situation requires a more formal discussion at another time.

To be effective and worthwhile, social-skills training must result in skills that (a) are socially relevant in the individual s life (social validity), (b) are used in a variety of situations (generalization), and (c) are maintained over time (treatment adherence) (Hansen, Nangle, & Meyer 1998). Such skills will be most consistently employed in a setting that is supportive and respectful of each person's individuality.

Teaching Social Skills through Role Playing and Observation

Role playing is a helpful technique for engaging student interest and providing opportunities for practice and feedback. One way to establish motivation and to inject some humor into the learning process is to ask students to role play a situation in which the identified skill is lacking. Role playing allows students to take on roles, provide feedback to one another, and practice new skills. Role playing enables students to simulate a wide range of school, community, and workplace interactions. For students with intellectual disabilities, role playing can provide an opportunity to practice appropriate small talk, a social skill that is key to acceptance in the inclusion classroom.

Role-playing exercises can help develop automaticity with small talk appropriate to the inclusion classroom. These include:

- Practicing automatic and brief responses for greetings and farewells. Responses should be brief, appropriate, and unelaborated. To how questions (e.g., How are you doing?) an appropriate response is Fine or Great. To what questions (e.g., What s up?), an appropriate response is Not much. The ability to use automatic and appropriate responses can be helpful in getting off to a good start in a new workplace.
- Practicing extending small talk by learning to add questions like How about you? or What about you? or What have you been doing? to the above responses.
- Role playing an interaction that includes acting out social errors, spotting the errors, and correcting them in a subsequent role play (with more able young adults). Examples of errors include inappropriate topics for small talk; inappropriately long response or no response when one is needed; inappropriately detailed response; and use of a small-talk formula when it is not appropriate.

The Inclusion Classroom Teacher's Power to Model Acceptance

Research on inclusion has found that students who are appropriately placed into inclusive classrooms are more successful when their nondisabled peers are accepting and supportive. Many schools are establishing peer-mentor relationships to educate nondisabled peers and help build relationships for emotional and social support.

However, probably the most important influence on positive classroom relationships and social attitudes is the attitude of the teacher and the degree to which the teacher models acceptance of students with special needs. Inclusion classroom teachers must directly address the importance of mutual acceptance and support within the classroom, and they must reflect on their own attitudes and ability to demonstrate such acceptance (Kochhar, West and Taymans)

Promoting Positive Social Interactions among Students with and without Learning Disabilities in an Inclusion Setting

Effective inclusion classroom teachers are distinguished by their positive approach to dealing with disciplinary problems. Rather than waiting for problems to develop and then reacting, effective inclusion classroom teachers organize their classrooms to promote positive behavior. Rather than looking for a quick fix for behavioral problems and issues, effective inclusion classroom teachers make a commitment to long-term behavioral change. This next section will focus on strategies to promote positive social interactions among all students that effective inclusion classroom teachers can use in their every day teaching and daily routine both in and outside of the classroom.

Conduct Class Meetings

Students, as a group, also can share their opinions and brainstorm solutions to class behavior problems, and general topics that concern students during class meetings. Class meetings are designed to help students understand the perspectives of others, so they are especially effective for resolving conflicts between students based on cultural differences.

Classroom problems and tensions between students in the inclusion classroom can be identified and handles by placing a box in the classroom where students and adults submit compliments and descriptions of problems and situations that made them feel upset, sad, annoyed, or angry. Compliments and concerns can be shared with the class, and all students can brainstorm possible solutions.

Use Values Clarification

Values clarification views classroom misbehavior as a result of confused values. Values clarification activities that are part of the curriculum sallow students to examine their attitudes, interests, and feelings and learn how these values affect their behavior. For example, after students express their attitudes or opinions or use a specific behavior, you might ask then, How did that affect you and others? , Why is that important to you? , and Did you consider any alternatives? You can also use values clarification by creating a nonjudgmental, open, and trusting environment. Such an atmosphere encourages students to share their values, feelings, and beliefs and respect those of others (Salend, 2001)

Use Praise As Often as Possible

Effective teachers in the inclusion classroom use a number of behavioral intervention techniques to help students learn how to manage their behavior. Perhaps the most important and effective of these is verbal reinforcement of appropriate behavior. The most common form of verbal reinforcement is praise given to a student when he or she begins and completes an activity or exhibits a particular desired behavior. Simple phrases such as good job encourage a student to act appropriately. Effective teachers praise students frequently and look for a behavior to praise before, and not after, a student gets off task.

The following strategies provide some guidance regarding the use of praise:

Define the appropriate behavior while giving praise. Praise should be specific for the positive behavior displayed by the student: The comments should focus on what the student did right and should include exactly what part(s) of the student s behavior was desirable. Rather than praising a student for not disturbing the class, for example, a teacher should praise him or her for quietly completing a math lesson on time.

Provide praise immediately. The sooner that approval is given regarding appropriate behavior, the more likely the student will repeat it.

Vary the statements given as praise. The comments used by teachers to praise appropriate behavior should vary; when students hear the same praise statement repeated over and over, it may lose its value.

Be consistent and sincere with praise. Appropriate behavior should receive consistent praise. Consistency among teachers with respect to desired behavior is important in order to avoid

confusion on the part of students with special needs. Similarly, students will notice when teachers give insincere praise, and this insincerity will make praise less effective.

It is important to keep in mind that the most effective teachers focus their behavioral intervention strategies on praise rather than on punishment. Negative consequences may temporarily change behavior, but they rarely change attitudes and may actually increase the frequency and intensity of inappropriate behavior by rewarding misbehaving students with attention. Moreover, punishment may only teach students what not to do; it does not provide students with the skills that they need to do what is expected. Positive reinforcement produces the changes in attitudes that will shape a student s behavior over the long term.

Project a Feeling, Caring Persona. Convince students that you like them (even though you might not always like their behaviors). Take time to greet students at the door when they first arrive into the classroom. Address students by name, and express an interest in their activities. Build au a store of positive comments to individual students, so that if later you must deliver negative feedback, it is not the first evaluation you have made of the student. Above all, try to assure students that you genuinely like them, and that you have their best interests in mind. Even though you will have both positive and negative reactions to their specific behaviors, you nevertheless always value them as individuals.

Use Reprimands Judiciously. Although positive responses to positive behavior are among the best overall methods of classroom management, negative feedback in the form of reprimands is sometimes necessary to help students succeed in your classroom. Overall, reprimands are best viewed as direct feedback that the student s behavior is inappropriate. If they are provided in a way that indicates concern for the student s well-being, they can be effective in improving behavior. Reprimands are less effective when viewed as punishment-that is, that criticism and scorn, or a negative, aggressive, or hostile tone of voice are expected to prevent the student from repeating the inappropriate behavior.

Research on reprimands suggests the following (Kerr and Nelson, 2002):

- Reprimand students privately, not publicly, to avoid humiliating or embarrassing the student.
- Stand near the student you are reprimanding. This allows you to use a more confidential tone of voice. However, remaining one leg length away respects the student's personal space.
- Use a normal tone of voice. Students can become desensitized over time to raised voices, and may be less inclined to respond defensively to a calm tone.
- Look at the student while you are speaking, but do NOT insist that the student return your eye contact. Forced eye contact can be viewed as hostile and aggressive, and in some cases even violate cultural norms.
- Never point your finger at the student you are reprimanding, as this again conveys aggression and hostility.
- Do not insist on having the last word. The final goal of your reprimand is increased compliance with class rules, not in getting in the final word.

Validate Student Feelings. Sometimes when faced with a reprimand, students accuse teachers of unfair treatment. For example, a student might say It doesn't matter what I do, you are always picking on me! This type of accusation often results in a defensive statement from the teacher: I am not picking on you, or, I treat everyone in this class the same. Instead of making a defensive comment, try validating the student s feelings by asking for specifics: I really don t want you to

think I am picking on you. If you give me specific examples, maybe we can solve the problem. Such an approach not only avoids a confrontation, it also validates the student s expressed feeling (whether true or not), as well as subtly challenging the student to document always being picked on. It also openly attempts to keep the lines of communication open.

Selectively ignore inappropriate behavior. It is sometimes helpful for teachers to selectively ignore inappropriate behavior. This technique is particularly useful when the behavior is unintentional or unlikely to recur or is intended solely to gain the attention of teachers or classmates without disrupting the classroom or interfering with the learning of others.

Provide activity reinforcement. Students receive activity reinforcement when they are encouraged to perform a less desirable behavior before a preferred one.

Utilize peer mediation. Members of a student s peer group can positively impact the behavior of students with special needs. Many schools now have formalized peer mediation programs, in which students receive training in order to manage disputes involving their classmates. Effective teachers also use behavioral prompts with their students. These prompts help remind students about expectations for their learning and behavior in the classroom.

Provide visual cues. Establish simple, nonintrusive visual cues to remind the student to remain on task. For example, you can point at the student while looking him or her in the eye, or you can hold out your hand, palm down, near the student.

Provide social skills classes. Teach students with special needs appropriate social skills using a structured class. For example, you can ask the students to role-play and model different solutions to common social problems. It is critical to provide for the generalization of these skills, including structured opportunities for the students to use the social skills that they learn. Offering such classes, or experiences, to the general school population can positively affect the school climate.

Implement problem solving sessions. Discuss how to resolve social conflicts. Conduct impromptu discussions with one student or with a small group of students where the conflict arises. In this setting, ask two students who are arguing about a game to discuss how to settle their differences. Encourage the students to resolve their problem by talking to each other in a supervised setting.

For many students with special needs, functional behavioral assessments and positive behavioral interventions and supports, including behavioral contracts and management plans, tangible rewards, or token economy systems, are helpful in teaching them how to manage their own behavior. Because students' individual needs are different, it is important for teachers, along with the family and other involved professionals, to evaluate whether these practices are appropriate for their classrooms.

Teach self-management systems. Train students to monitor and evaluate their own behavior without constant feedback from the teacher. In a typical self-management system, the teacher identifies behaviors that will be managed by a student and provides a written rating scale that includes the performance criteria for each rating. The teacher and student separately rate student behavior during an activity and compare ratings. The student earns points if the ratings match or are within one point and receives no points if ratings are more than one point apart; points are

exchanged for privileges. With time, the teacher involvement is removed, and the student becomes responsible for self-monitoring (DuPaul & Stoner as cited in Shinn, Walker, & Stoner, 2002).

Post positive behavior. Public posting of students' behaviors has also been seen to reduce behavior problems. Students behaviors can be evaluated and recorded on publicly posted charts. Students who follow classroom rules can be given a star next to their name for each class period, day or other appropriate length of time.

Promote self-monitoring. Self-monitoring strategies involve teaching students to monitor and evaluate their own classroom behavior. In some cases, students may be asked to monitor their general on-task behavior. In other cases, students may monitor themselves for a specific behavior, such as teasing. Before implementing self-monitoring interventions, meet individually and discuss with students the purpose and importance of classroom behavior, and how they will benefit personally from better classroom behavior. The students should be made to understand that the intervention is in their best interest.

Train for generalization. Most positive social behaviors are of limited use unless they can be shown to generalize to appropriate situations outside the training context. It is particularly important that students in inclusive settings are able to generalize all the positive social behaviors they have learned in other settings; however, students with special needs often demonstrate problems in generalizing learned behavior. As important social behaviors are learned, make a list of all the settings and situations into which behavior must generalize, and all the individuals who will observe the generalized behavior. Then, create a plan to promote generalization across all these settings and individuals.

Deal appropriately with name calling and teasing. Friendships in classrooms and positive behavior can be established by preventing name calling and teasing as soon as it happens. Effective behavioral management for these situations include:

- Establishing a rule about no name calling and teasing
- Make it clear to students that name-calling and teasing will not be tolerated
- Responding immediately to incidents of name-calling and teasing with a discussion of differences and discrimination
- Helping students recognize and explore the reasons why they are uncomfortable with individual differences
- Helping students to understand individual differences by giving them information

Offer choices and solicit preferences. Allowing students to make choices and express their preferences can promote self-determination.
Because the school day involves a series of choices, you can integrate activities involving choices into both teaching and nonteaching parts of the daily schedule. If students have difficulty making choices, you can start by providing them with options. Cooperative learning arrangements, student-selected projects and rewards, self-management and metacognitive techniques, and learning strategies also allow students to guide their own learning.

Promote self-esteem. Promoting self-esteem in students can improve their ability to advocate for themselves. Students with low self-esteem often make negative statements about themselves that hinder their performance, such as I'm not good at this and I'll never complete it. You can

promote self-esteem by helping students understand the harmful effects of low self-esteem, and by structuring academic and social situations so that students succeed. Other methods include recognizing students' achievements and talents, teaching them to use self-management techniques, asking them to perform meaningful classroom and school based jobs, and posting their work in the classroom and throughout the school.

Provide attribution training. Students' self-determination and self-esteem can be fostered by attribution training, which involves teaching students to analyze the events and actions that lead to success and failure. Students who understand attribution recognize and acknowledge that their positive performance is due to effort, and other factors within themselves. Students who fail to understand attribution often attribute their poor performance to bad luck, teacher error, lack of ability, or other external factors.

Demonstrate or model rules and procedures and then allow students to rehearse them. The teacher demonstrates both the correct and incorrect forms of the behavior (e.g., sitting at a desk quietly, getting to the pencil sharpener). The demonstration enables the students to discriminate the dimensions of the behavior. Students are then given an opportunity to practice the required behavior. Mastering rules and procedures is similar to learning academics; it requires teacher instruction and feedback combined with student practice. After negative attention, provide immediate reinforcement and attention when the student displays the appropriate behavior. This identifies the accepted behavior and reaffirms that appropriate behaviors are reinforced and inappropriate behaviors are punished.

With older students, use contingency contracts. Contingency contracts are written agreements between the teacher and the student that indicate what the student must do to earn a specific reward. These agreements, like most contracts, are negotiated; both parties must accept the terms. Because they involve negotiation and require students to assume responsibility for fulfilling their part of the bargain, contracts are probably best for older students.

Research suggests the following rules for developing contingency contracts with students in the classroom:

- The initial contract payoff (reward) should be immediate
- The initial contracts should call for and reward small approximations
- Reward frequently with small amounts
- The contract should call for and reward accomplishment rather than obedience
- Reward the behavior after it occurs
- The contract must be fair
- The terms of the contract must be clear
- The contract must be honest
- The contract must be positive
- Contracting as a method must be used systematically

In sum, a good contract identifies the responsibilities of both parties and the consequences if the terms are not fulfilled.