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How Do I Prepare Myself to Teach in an Inclusion Classroom?

Best practice would be the first thing that comes to mind, but what exactly does that entail? As an educator, it is our job to teach students how to learn, even though we are labeled as math, reading, or science teachers. If we as educators teach a child how to solve a system of equations, we say that we have had success, but if we can say that we taught that child how to be a lifelong learner that child will have success. So is best practice different with inclusion? The answer is no. As an educator, it is my job to get to know my students and teach from where they are, which is exactly what a special education teacher does. With general education students, I have to assess their starting point and attempt to get them to a higher academic level, with special education students the objective is the same. There is a lot of research on differentiation and what it looks like in a typical classroom, so when the idea of inclusion came to our school all it did was stretch the level of academic levels in the class.

So back to the original prompt, how do I prepare myself to teach in an inclusion classroom? The answer is that I use best practices for all of my students and differentiate my instruction according to where each student is academically. There are many methods to assess where students are, but with special education students there is extra support. The school psychologist provides a detailed profile on the student that helps to adjust my instruction accordingly. By knowing the disability of my students I can repeat, tier material, adjust scales, and use any other type of written accommodation that fits the needs of the student. Also, by knowing their academic levels I can search the current standards and see the progression of skills so that I can teach at their level. There are language acquisition strategies that I use for all my students that are beneficial to all abilities. These strategies are sometimes very hands on, but also very visual with cues that allow for students to encode the information. There are many accommodations that are used for special education students such as extended time, being read to, shortened assignments, and other strategies to help them, but in reality they benefit all students. The fact that these students have it written down somewhere tends to give them a bit more priority and rightfully so, but I hope that my instruction hits every student at their level.

One of recent successes I’ve had with the inclusion model stemmed from using a strategy from G.L.A.D. (Guided Language Acquisition Design). As a society one of the biggest fears is speaking in public; in classrooms the fear exponentially increases. As educators, we rely on

formative assessment to gauge our instruction and the learning of our students. With numbered heads, students are randomly asked to participate, but they are prepared by their group members with a discussion before they are called on to respond. One of my non special education students was called on and was struggling to use the right terminology. After a few seconds of struggle, the student had the deer in headlights look. It was one of the special education students that not only assisted him, but helped to assess and correct his thinking. The student used examples the group talked about and you could see that he was very confident in his assistance. I feel that these little moments are worth the efforts of having inclusion in our classrooms.

In conclusion, I feel that best practice will always be the way to go for mainstream and special education. As we understand more about the mind and the human spirit, that practice will evolve for the better. As educators we need the will and the skill to help all of our students, so our practice must evolve along with what research learns. Inclusion is much more than an opportunity for our special education students to learn academics; it is a way to get to know a complete world, so we must do our best to give them the best experience.

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