How to Implement Inclusion in the Preschool Environment

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore how special needs children can be included into a general education environment. It address the problems that I have encountered in my brief tenure teaching a special needs inclusion preschool classroom and my journey to discover the answer to “How to Implement Inclusion in the Preschool Environment”. I discuss my experience in the field as an observer participant as well as learning how to interview the people described in my transcripts. I talk about how my focus changed as my data evolved and the decisions that lead to my final attempt to discover the answers I needed to be successful in my career. This paper also examines several research studies which support my findings and the opinions of other educators I have approached about this subject. This paper concludes with the lessons I have learned while seeking the answers to my questions.

**How to Implement Inclusion in the Preschool Environment**

**Not in Kansas anymore**

In March of 2012, I graduated from West Virginia State University with a certification in K-6 education. I rapidly discovered that things were not as I had been told in collage; jobs were not easy for newly minted teachers to find here in Kanawha County. After months of looking for a classroom to teach in and with school starting in just a few days I was lucky enough to find a job as a first year teacher. Unfortunately, it was a preschool special needs classroom, not what I had trained for but something I thought I was familiar with. Prior to going to collage I had run my own daycare center for 20 years, preschool by Lisa if you will. I thought that between my prior job experience and the knowledge I had gained acquiring my degree I was more than up to the task of teaching preschoolers. How hard could it be? I knew preschoolers and classroom management was one of my strong suites so I thought all I would need to do is learn Kanawha County’s curriculum and I would be set.

Since that fateful day I was hired I have been on a journey to learn as much as I can about inclusion within the preschool setting. I had originally been told that I would have 2-4 special needs children in my classroom. I now find myself with 11 out of my 23 students having special needs and all of the paperwork that entails. While the paper work is daunting I am even more daunted by challenge of discovering how to meet the needs of my “special” children, after all isn’t helping all of my students reach their academic potential the goal of teaching?

On the first day of school I found myself feeling like Dorothy in the Wizard of OZ, caught up in a twister and delivered into a place where nothing was as I had believed it would be and on a quest to find out how to teach in an all inclusion environment. I was in a whirlwind of new teacher classes, new preschool classes, and with three different, and often contradictory, sets of rules given to me to run my class. If that wasn’t enough since my certification was in K-6, I was also required to take graduate level classes in special education preschool to fulfill the terms of my hiring.

**Lisa’s adventures in Munchkin land**

As the first day of school began I discovered that instead of two special needs children a class I had 6 in my morning class and two in the afternoon class. While I had 20 years of preschool experience behind me I only had limited exposure to children with special needs. Now I had children with conditions with names like Autism, Prader Willi’s, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), ADHD, and Pervasive Development Disorder (PDD). While I had heard of some of them in my classes I had no real experience dealing with them and no idea how to help them reach the goals laid out in their IEP’s. I didn’t really even understand how to fully read an IEP let alone implement the recommendation contained in one. Yet, here I was, and expected to help not only these special needs students but also my typical peers become happy and well prepared kindergarteners. This seemed overwhelming by itself but I also had to take graduate classes and ***WRITE*** IEP’s in my very first month.

Since I was taking a class in Qualitative Research and needed to find a topic I knew nothing about I decided to use this paper as an opportunity to answer some of my question and hopefully learn how to help my students be successful. After careful consideration I was able to refine my research topic to “How to Implement Inclusion in the Preschool Environment”. Once I decided on my topic I arranged to do field observations in using what Bogdean & Biklen (2007) referred to as the “cooperative style” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) in another preschool classroom in the hopes of finding some answers from someone who had already passed the hurdles I was going through.

In my first observation I went to a classroom where I discovered that unlike myself Ms. Ashley only had one special needs child and he only had minor physical limitations. I remember entering Ms. Ashley’s classroom for the first time and wondering if I was in the right place because no one there had any obvious special needs. Eventually I was able to identify that Nathan did indeed have a physical limitation. In my first observation:

*“Nathan, her special needs student, was disappointed that he wasn't called upon and threw himself flat on the ground. Ms. Ashley asked him what was wrong and he told her "But you didn't call on me!" and began to cry. She gave Nathan a hug and asked him to go back and sit where he was supposed to and that there would be other chances for him to answer questions later. Nathan sat back down but was distracted by a pants leg that had come up and was bothering him. I helped him to adjust his pants leg and got my first good look at his braces.”*

This event underscored that despite a having braces on his legs Nathan was essentially a typical peer. Had this been one of my ADHD students one of my aides would have had to stop whatever she was doing and calm them down. It is not unusual for an ADHD student to need to be escorted away from the circle to calm him down away from the other children when they have similar meltdowns.

Unfortunately I was more concerned with how to better address the cognitive needs of my children than their physical needs so most of my time visiting Ms. Ashley was unproductive in resolving my questions about inclusion during both of my observations. I did however find some classroom practices that I felt could be used to help my special needs students. Ms. Ashley’s use of music for example is something that I have adopted into my own classroom. In the final analysis of my observations in her room I was still unable to answer the questions I had about inclusion and how to help my own special needs students.

**Are you a Good Witch or a Bad Witch?**

After discovering that Ms. Ashley did not face the same problems I was facing and couldn’t help me I had to come up with a new stratagem. I decided to interview a new preschool teacher (2 years’ experience) and an experienced preschool teacher (16 years’ experience) to compare their philosophies and hopefully find answers to the questions that were still handicapping me My special needs iterant came to my rescue again and put me in contact with perfect candidates to conduct my interviews with. Mr. Susie was my first interviewee, she was fairly new the preschool world and only been teaching for two years. Her class composition was similar to mine and I hoped she had useful learning experiences to share with me.

Ms. Susie had a master’s degree in preschool education and had been pursuing her master’s degree in special education for the last 2 years. My interview with Ms. Susie showed me that she too was trapped in the cyclone and was still twirling around trying to find answers herself. For example when she was explaining her thought on inclusion she said:

*“It is pretty tough[pause]to actually pin point and get all the minutes in [pause] because so many of them have so many needs [pause] so many different needs [pause] particularly in the morning session. So many are taken out for PT,OT and speech so trying to get everything [pause] So [pause] I want to say we do the best we can [pause].but umm [pause]but it is difficult...”*

I could tell by the way she paused and groped around for words she was on the same path that I was. I was reminded of the scene in the Wizard of OZ where Dorothy was at the crossroads trying to find her bearings and the scarecrow pointed in both directions at the same time and told her to “go that-away, no go that-away” and pointed in to new directions. If this was coming from a teacher who had been on this path for two years, what hope did I have?

After my experiences interviewing a new teacher and discovering that she too was seeking answers I was looking forward to my second interviewee, Ms. Betsy. Ms. Betsy has her master’s degree in preschool special education and more importantly has 16 years of experience working with severe special needs children. I was counting on her being able to help me get back to Kansas and the answers I needed. Ms. Betsy, much like Glenda the Good Witch of the North, showed me that I had the tools I needed to be successful all along; I just didn’t know I had them. During her interview she gave me the keys to reach my special needs students, and meet their IEP requirements as well as how to write their future goals.

Ms. Betsy summed up what I needed to know by simply stating:

*“I know they're developmental sequence. What do they need first and then what do they need next. So I just follow this even with the special needs children. I just follow the typical developmental sequence at a much slower pace.”*

This was the key I was looking for! It unlocked the mystery of how to teach my special needs students and I could almost immediately see how this could be applied to my students. It was brilliant in its simplicity! She confirmed this for me by saying:

*“Yes that is the key, so you know the developmental sequence for writing. They start out fisted, and then they have partial, then they move to the better grasp. So the developmental sequence is the same for the special needs students but they are doing it at a much slower rate.”*

This summed up not only how to teach my special needs students but how to determine their future goals for their IEP’s as well. I finally felt as if I had a brain

After she explained the key to me I asked her how to document everything I was required to document and was again rewarded with more information than I had hoped for. Ms. Betsy told me to:

*“Just save work samples, take pictures, and take notes so that you have some documentation in place. Teachers look at those IEP goals. I only have so many minutes of this and so many minutes of that. But you come work those things that you are doing with all the kids. You know that that a child may need a little bit more modification, or he may need someone to help him hang up his coat or he may need visuals at circle time. You do the same things you just modify the curriculum a little bit so that they can understand it and learn from it.”*

This clarified for me how to handle all of the documentation that was required by the Head Start, Preschool, and Special Needs programs. Until this point I had felt overwhelmed by all of the required paperwork, Ms. Betsy’s system suddenly made all of it seem manageable.

The third pearl of wisdom Ms. Betsy bestowed upon me was the Heart of Preschool. I had asked her what traits she felt made a preschool teacher successful and she told me:

*“So you kind of have to be patient and give them the time to learn. And persistent. Repetition over and over again.”, “But I think that if you are really going to teach skills you have to be really, really structured.”,” I think that affection [pause] you know, you have to be affectionate with them. Because you are, like a parent figure to them. And enjoy playing, you know, and really I think the other thing is that you have to be structured but you can't be too rigid, because your day changes from day to day. You never know what's going to happen.”*

This truly is the Heart of the Preschool experience. These were things I had been doing all along but had become second nature to me and now I appreciated what they really meant to the children.

The final piece of the puzzle Ms. Betsy supplied me with was the courage to face the challenges my severe and profound students present. I felt like the cowardly lion when it came to these students, their needs and frailty scared me to death. She shared her experiences with me concerning these students and told me a heartbreaking story about one of her own students who she forced to stand every day not knowing his hips were dislocated. She then went on to say:

*“There are things like that that I just don't think that should be in an elementary school. I believe that is beyond what a teacher knows. I have always felt that there should be something like a rehab center for students who are severely medically involved…. But it's not the system that we have right now. So I don't know.”*

Even Ms. Susie stated that:

*“I agree with inclusion and in a sense I don’t agree. I’m um, am, um [pause] kind of wavering because I agree with it in a sense that you know that these certain children they may have conditions they can and may need assistance through the routine and those sort of things but it isn’t a specific one on one [pause] hand over hand, feeding, diapering [pause] those kind of things that one person solely has to do ... some of these severe kids it might be better for them to be in special classroom.”*

I felt better knowing that I wasn’t the only one who was questioning their ability to meet these children’s medical needs. I was trained as a teacher not as a nurse or therapist and have no idea how to handle these kinds of ailments.

**The Yellow Brick Road**

The process of learning how to do Qualitative Research has also been an adventure that mirrors Dorothy’s trip to OZ. I was originally frozen without any way to move forward much like when we meet the tin man for the first time and he is frozen with rust. Fortunately as the class progressed I began to be able to move forward a little bit at a time as I came to understand the concepts behind Qualitative Research. As the knowledge began to seep into my brain it was as like the tin man receiving oil until finally I could move forward freely towards finding the answers to my questions about inclusion.

One of my first milestones was admitting that my field observations were not getting me any closer to finding out how to use inclusion in a preschool environment. Upon realizing that my original vision was not going to help me achieve my goal I utilized what Patton (2002) referred to as “emergent design flexibility” or adjusting ones plans to meet changing circumstances. Patton sums this up by stating “A naturalistic design unfolds or emerges as fieldwork unfolds” (Patton, 2002). Following Patton’s lead I adjusted my strategy and decided to focus my research exclusively on my interviews. While this seems like a simple decision I found it hard to abandon my field observations and all the hours of work I had put into them. Ultimately I knew that this was the only way forward and so I left Ms. Ashley’s classroom behind me and moved onto my interviews and hopefully the answers I needed. Patton gave me the heart to move on.

I had never conducted this kind of interview before so I needed to draw from Spradley (1979) to help me find my way. Spradley’s descriptions and examples of the ethnographic interview proved extremely helpful in conducting my own interviews. His advice to “think of interviews as a series of friendly conversations” (Spradley, 1997) helped me change my concept of the interview process. My original concept had been one of a formal stuffy setting where the interviewer acted as an interrogator and forced information from the interviewee. Spradley’s advice helped me change this view to one where I just needed to sit across from my interviewee and ask open ended question to guide the direction of the interview.

My first interview with Ms. Susie was a learning experience in and of its self. I found myself asking questions but not necessarily the kind of leading questions I wanted to ask. It is hard to genuinely listen to someone and still remain objective enough to pick up on key elements and guide the conversation. I have a newfound respect for professionals who do this on a regular basis. Dr Luttrell’s collection of five years’ worth of interviews with her PPPT girls is a good example. There are parallels between what Luttrell saw in “Title XI cast education as a right to which pregnant teen and teen mothers were entitled” (Luttrel, 2003) and the policy of inclusion. Neither example asked the group affected most by the policy what they thought would be best for them. Acting as an observer participant and conducting interviews for that long a period must have been a herculean feat of endurance. Her efforts gave me the courage to do my own interviews.

Armed with the experience I gained from conducting my first interview I felt much better prepared to conduct my second interview. Fate smiled on me when it allowed me to have Ms. Betsy as my second interview. I am not sure it would have gone nearly as well if I did not have the lessons I learned from my first interview. Discovering how to better design my questions to gain more information and how to act as a traffic cop speeding up, slowing down, and directing which direction the interview was taking helped me find the keys I was looking for.

After Ms. Betsy helped me answer my research question I then began to look for collaborative evidence to support my position. One of the first articles I examined showed that Ms. Susie, Ms. Betsy, and my own opinions were not isolated examples or unsupported by research. In 2010, Selcuk University in Konya Turkey conducted research examining the attitudes of 66 preschool teachers regarding inclusion. One of the more interesting findings from this study was “that although there are considerable data on the outcomes of specific interventions in integrated early-childhood programmes, very little is known about how to apply this information to mainstreamed settings” (Secer, 2010). This finding mirrors my own experience as well as that of many teachers I have spoken to. I feel that more research is needed to identify ways of implementing inclusion in the classroom. While most teachers have good intentions not knowing how to apply inclusion limits what we do to help our special needs children.

Another study that helped me believe that I was on the right track was a study of 155 preschool teachers in the Midwest. This study was designed to see how preschool teachers understanding of their students disabilities affected their attitudes towards inclusion. Much like my own views the study showed that “teachers responded differently to the types of disability regardless of the diagnostic labels; that is, teachers responded more positively to children with mild disabilities (e.g., children with Down syndrome) and those with physical disabilities (e.g., cerebral palsy). In addition, compared with children with diagnostic labels, teachers responded more positively to those with no diagnostic labels.” (Huang & Diamond, 2009). It seems that most teachers share Ms. Betsy’s and Ms. Susie’s opinion that they are ill equipped to handle the more severe disabilities.

I had not been prepared to find that my ideas on the subject were widely held. It seemed however that everyone I had interviewed and several outside studies showed that most teachers felt inclusion was a great concept but that some students were not good candidates for inclusion due to profound physical, emotional, or cognitive conditions. Merriam (1995) states that “Internal validity asks the question: How congruent are one’s finings with reality?” (Merrium, 1995). The size of the sample and the fact that it mirrored my own research and experiences indicates that these findings most likely have internal validity. Merriam’s focus on statistics gave me a brain to help me validate my beliefs. Society may need to reexamine its policy of inclusion to better reflect the opinions of educators and current research.

It is curious to note that despite a federal mandate that inclusion be used in all schools “Most textbooks used for instruction in general education classrooms are not appropriate to meet the needs of students with mild disabilities.” (Gunter, Reffel, Rice, Peterson, & Venn, 2005). It seems as though designing a textbook to meet all children’s needs, not just the typical peers, would be a requirement of all school systems. This article further pointed out that “teachers may modify as much as 40% of the textbook material in general education classrooms for students with mild disabilities.” (Gunter, Reffel, Rice, Peterson, & Venn, 2005). Not having books that meet the needs of everyone further reduces that amount of time teachers with inclusion classrooms have to meet their student’s needs.

Another thought-provoking article I found had an interesting conclusion which “suggested that the (special needs) child should be prepared for the regular education class by making the program of the special education class gradually for the student until s/he is ready for the inclusion.” (Odluyurt & Batu, 2009). This approach seems to make a great deal of sense. By giving the special needs child the tools to be successful in a general education classroom before placing him there we could greatly reduce the amount of stress we put on them. This would also remove the burden of teaching the child these skills from the general education teacher.

Once I had found confirmation of my findings I reexamined my data and came to the conclusion that since my research excluded my field notes from observation I should exclude it from my coding as well. I reexamined my original coding and then narrowed it down so that only those words from my interviews were included and divided them into three broad categories to help me organize my thoughts. My final three coding categories reflected my choice of metaphor and were: Munchkin Land, Are you a Good Witch or a Bad Witch, and the Yellow Brick Road. One thing I did discover during this process was a plethora of free software programs available on the internet to breakdown word usage. I can’t even begin to imagine how hard and time consuming this process must have been before the advent of computers.

At the end of my journey I have found myself back in Kansas where everything makes sense again. The answer to my question “How to Implement Inclusion in the Preschool Environment” turned out not to be as complex as I had original feared it would be. The answer is that you need to teach each child according to where they are in their developmental cycle. Regardless of where they are in their development, or what limitations they have, this will ensure that they are receiving the appropriate kind of education to best suit their needs. Structure is an important consideration as well and both special needs and typical peers can benefit from it. Love is also an important element in reaching special needs children. This unquantifiable, intangible emotion helps each child to develop to reach his or her highest potential. Without this human interaction we may as well just sit them down in front of a television and let Sesame Street try to meet their needs.

While this class originally frightened me and took me out of my comfort zone it has answered the questions that were keeping up at night trying to figure out how to best help “MY” kids. I now feel much more prepared to meet the challenges teaching has thrown at me. I sincerely believe it will allow me to make a bigger difference in enhancing the chances of my special needs students becoming successful in the future.

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