Chapter 14

The Year of Teaching Inclusively: Building an Elementary Classroom for All Students

Amy J. Petersen
University of Northern Iowa, USA

Mona Nassir Al Nassir
University of Northern Iowa, USA

Caroline F. Elser
University of Northern Iowa, USA

Jessica Stakey
Eagle Grove School District, USA

Karissa Everson
Eagle Grove School District, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how inclusive elementary classrooms may be constructed in ways that not only honor the individual differences that all students bring into the classroom, but also embrace those differences in ways that foster a classroom space prefaced on rigorous academic instruction for all, as well as care, empathy, and social connections that enhance learning. This chapter provides a snapshot of one inclusive elementary classroom and describes the beliefs and philosophies that underpin the classroom setting, as well as the characteristics that embody instruction and learning.

INTRODUCTION

A parent of a child with a disability expressed to one of the authors of this chapter her desire for her son to have an ordinary life. “Strange, I know” she shared, explaining:

An ordinary life is a life filled with typical, expected opportunities that you would wish for any child—friends, after school activities, homework, prom, and college. It is these same ordinary moments that I wish for my son. And, while this wish is seemingly simple, it is not. In our efforts to best educate students

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2520-2.ch014
with disabilities we have “specialized them.” They are “special” children with “special needs,” requiring of us “special strategies.” In fact, they are not so “special” after all; they are children, deserving of the same ordinary lives afforded to all children.

If the task, then, for educators is to create opportunities that result in ordinary lives for students, Ms. Stakey and Mrs. Everson have succeeded at creating the ordinary classroom where all students are afforded ordinary, everyday moments and opportunities to learn and grow with and from one another.

Ms. Stakey and Mrs. Everson teach in a small, working class, rural and ethnically diverse community. Comprised of 19 students, their classroom includes six students who receive special education services, five students who receive talent and gifted services, and two students who receive Title I services. While these students are diverse, they are as much alike as they are different. Ms. Stakey and Mrs. Everson's class is nondescript in that it looks like any other third grade classroom. It is filled with bright posters, colorful alphabet letters, student-constructed rules, bookshelves of high interest books, writing centers, student work, and clusters of student desks that encourage interaction and conversation. The classroom is warm, welcoming, and elicits feelings of home. There is a letter to students posted on the back wall. It reads:

Dear Students,

I believe in you. I trust in you. You are listened to. You are cared for. You are important. You will succeed.

Love, Mrs. Everson and Ms. Stakey.

This letter captures the essence of the classroom, and perhaps, this classroom is not as ordinary as it first seems. To “unspecialize” all the assumed necessary “specialness” attached to the identities and subsequent services provided to students with disabilities are actually quite extraordinary. Ensuring the ordinary within a special education system that historically has existed and operated on the very notion of “special” and “different” is, in fact, quite extraordinary—just not in the way we might first assume.

While the intent of the field of special education is to provide a free and appropriate education to students with disabilities through the delivery of special education services and supports, this intent emerges from a troubled and problematic history that many of us within the field have yet to confront. In our efforts to best serve students with disabilities, we have labeled, segregated, and assumed students with disabilities to be so different from us that they require drastically different experiences, interactions, opportunities, and curriculum. In this belief, we have stripped the ordinary moments and opportunities from their lives and thus, have inadvertently failed to educate these students (Smith, 2010; Valle & Connor, 2011). As educators, we must confront this torrid past, challenge what we might first assume about students with disabilities, and in doing so, promote and ensure all students have access to ordinary moments, experiences, and learning opportunities (Connor, Valle, & Hale, 2015; Gabel & Connor, 2014) Mrs. Everson and Ms. Starkey’s classroom provides such a model of ordinary and while they would not claim to be extraordinary, their humble and gracious approach to teaching all students is extraordinary. In this chapter, we share a snapshot their story of teaching inclusively over the course of one school year.