



Mentoring in the 21st Century[®]

Issue VII

by Paula Rutherford

This newsletter provides advice, insights, and suggestions helpful to mentors and induction program coordinators as they strive to support new teachers. Also included are timely instructional tips mentors can share with new teachers. This month's issue focuses on challenges of collaboration in inclusive classrooms.

Challenges of Collaboration in Inclusive Classrooms

The powerful potential for high levels of student learning in inclusive classrooms is accompanied by potential pitfalls for special education and general education teachers who are expected to work together. New teachers including special education, general education, and teachers who are specialists in working with English Language Learners, report great frustration with the roadblocks and resistance they encounter when trying to do this collaborative work. Mentors often struggle in their efforts to support new teachers in this endeavor because they have not had (or seized) an opportunity to experience a co-planning or co-teaching role themselves. This is truly something most of us did not learn in college!

Public Law 94-142 (Education of All Handicapped Children Act) passed in 1975 required that students with disabilities be taught in the “least restrictive environment.” At that time we brought most of our students back to their home schools from outside placements. That first step at mainstreaming led to the establishment of self-contained classrooms where core subjects were taught by special education teachers and resource rooms where special education teachers worked with their students in either a remedial or compensatory approach. What went on in these classrooms was usually driven IEP goals with little consideration of the curriculum or program of studies followed by the rest of the students in the schools.

PL 94-142, now known as **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**, as amended in 1997, requires that all students have access to the same rich curriculum as all other students and that they be held to the same level of accountability as all other students. With those requirements, there can no longer be different curriculums and standards and all students must have instruction from teachers who are not only well versed in pedagogy, learning theory, and working with children with disabilities or language challenges (the special educators and second language specialists), but with teachers who are also knowledgeable and skillful with the content to be taught and learned (the general educators). This clearly requires that teachers collaborate in ways that have not previously been the norm.

Hence, our responsibilities as mentors include assisting our new colleagues in blazing trails we ourselves may not yet have blazed. Mentoring and induction programs alone cannot resolve all the issues associated with this collaboration but we can serve as models and advocates, and be life-long learners as we go about our mentoring practice. Here are a few tips about how to move this process forward.

Focus on Individuals First and Exceptionality or Specialty Second

IDEA wisely brings to our attention the fact that students are individuals first and disabilities are second. The same should be held true for teachers; that is, teachers are teachers first and their areas of specialization come second. We can extend the construct of individuals first and specialty second to our relationships with administrators and parents. We are, after all, supposed to be on the same team. Those in charge of mentoring programs should ensure that teachers who specialize in secondary social studies or fifth grade have the opportunity to interact with and mentor/be mentored by those who specialize in working with students who are learning disabled, autistic, or second language learners. If special educators only interact with other special educators and general educators only interact with those who know what they know, we are missing great job-embedded professional development opportunities.

Ensure That Inclusive Education Includes Inclusive Language and Professional Practice

Students with disabilities cannot really be included until teachers of students with disabilities are included as full-fledged partners in school-wide and classroom settings. That means, special educators need to be invited to and should attend team and department meetings and be blended in with grade level and/or content area teachers for meetings, task forces, professional development, and every other interaction. Another extremely important component of inclusion is inclusive language. Eliminate the phrases “my classroom” and “my students” and “your students” from professional dialogue and discussions. Replace them with “our students” and “our classroom.” Until we help our colleagues, experienced and new, realize that all the children belong to all of us and that all the adults in the school need to be committed to the success of all the other adults, we will continue to miss out on important opportunities for student learning and the revolving door of special educators will continue to spin faster and faster.

New educators report situations where they are supposed to be “co-teaching” but are in reality expected to serve as instructional assistants or “pull-out” students with disabilities or second language learners and work with them at a back table. That is not inclusive education. That is exclusion in the same room! There may be absolutely no malice in those engaged in this practice. It may instead be a lack of knowledge and skills about how to work in a collaborative manner. Mentors can assist in the development of that knowledge and those skills by orchestrating visits to highly collaborative classrooms or providing references and resources to both the new teachers and the veterans who are also learning new practices.

Recognize, Validate, and Work to Minimize the Incredible Demands Placed on New Special Educators

New special educators are drowning in the demands placed on them. Yes, the paperwork is a nightmarish challenge but it is part of the job. You do not go into this specialty area if you want to avoid paperwork. The most valuable support we can give them in this arena is to arrange for coaching by someone who has created systems that minimize the time that has to be spent to do high-quality paperwork. Be sure that the new teachers are interacting with positive voices rather than listening to those who are inclined to hold “pity parties” with them.

Challenges at the elementary level occur when new special educators are expected to be in multiple classrooms at the same time and there is often no common planning time with one or more of those teachers. As mentors we need to investigate those situations and coach them in how to deal with the realities they face. At both the elementary and secondary level they are often asked to prepare lessons in multiple subjects at multiple grade levels/levels of complexity. As mentors or mentor program coordinators we need to advocate for these new teachers and coach them in working in productive but realistic ways with multiple colleagues and multiple preparations. They do not know how to set priorities and are often intimidated by the veteran teachers who tell them what to do. These conditions clearly contribute to the high turn-over rates in special education.

Recognize and Acknowledge the Fear of Public Teaching

Teaching has been one of the most private of acts. The very idea of having another adult in the room can be frightening to experienced teachers who are insecure in any way and especially to those who are concerned that they are not as knowledgeable or skillful as they ought to be. It appears that new educators are much more comfortable working in the classroom with other adults because they have just come from a student teaching practicum or from the business community where almost all work environments are public. They may see the resistance of veteran teachers as a personal affront when in fact it may be that the veteran teacher is actually worried about their own sense of self. Coaching a new teacher in this situation requires a skillful mentor.

Use Just ASK Resources to Support New Teacher Work in Inclusive Settings

The Mentoring Calendar includes a section each month titled: **Especially for Special Educators**. Listed there are suggestions on how to support new special educators with their unique issues. Mentors can also guide discussions about specific actions all teachers can take in inclusive classrooms. The ideas listed on those calendar pages can serve as a menu from which new educators can select a starting point or next step. What seems to be an impossible task is less daunting when a doable first or next step is identified.. Some of the issues addressed there are the planning process, teacher status, classroom routines, data gathering and analysis, and pet peeves.

Resource Tips

- **Keeping the Committed: The Importance of Induction and Support Programs for New Special Educators** by Lynn Boyer and Phoebe Gillespie was published in the September/October 2000 issue of *Teaching Exceptional Children*, a journal of the **Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)**. This article enumerates the reasons special educators leave the field and the special challenges they face as new teachers; it also includes descriptions of programs to support special educators and a list of six specific actions to take.
- **Retention of Special Education Professionals: A Practical Guide of Strategies and Activities for Educators and Administrators**. Copies are available from the **National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education** at 1-800-641-7824 or on-line at <http://www.cec.sped.org/>

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