The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 7, Episode 6

Including Students with Intellectual Disabilities in General Education

Tim Villegas:
I spend a lot of time thinking about inclusion. Most of this energy is spent coming up with ways to explain inclusive education clearly and succinctly so that everyone understands what it is and why it's essential. Because to me, it's one of the most crucial things that we can do for our students disabled or non-disabled. And here's the challenge. You probably already have thoughts and opinions about inclusion. Maybe you have already decided that the challenges that your child or students have would not be appropriate in a general education classroom. Perhaps you have a notion that inclusion is good, but you don't know what it looks like or how to even advocate for it, or maybe you're all in for inclusive education and want your child or student in general education. 100% of the time, all day, every day in all these scenarios, we need to take a step back and see the larger picture of how inclusive education fits in our educational system.

Tim Villegas:
When I started as a special education teacher in 2003, I worked in what was called a special day class in Pasadena, California, with the majestic San Gabriel mountains outside my window. I taught my heart out for fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students with labels of moderate to severe autism. I was still going to school at the time because in California, you could be hired as a special education teacher with a provisional teaching certificate. My teaching program promoted inclusive practices, and this meant that it covered models like co-teaching where special and general education teachers would work in the same classroom or a special ed teachers would collaborate with general ed teachers and strategies for including students with autism or, or other low incidence disabilities in general education classrooms. I distinctly remember having a discussion with a professor of mine, uh, in a, in a program, um, about how they just didn't understand that students with autism needed to be educated with other autistic students.

Tim Villegas:
And, um, I told her, but my students need to be taught routine. Uh, how will they learn that in a general education classroom? How can they do the same things that everyone else can, they can't be held to the same standard or expectations instead of debating our philosophies. My professor just gave us an assignment, pick one student who was educated in a self-contained or a segregated classroom and create an inclusion plan. And don't pick an easy one, pick a student that you would never think would, could ever tolerate time in a general education classroom. She said, so I thought about it and I had the perfect one. It was Nathan, not as real name by the way. And, uh, he was a fifth grade student who had limited verbal abilities and engaged in self-injurious behavior. Uh, and he also, uh, engaged in verbal stimming, which was extremely disruptive. And when he got angry, he would kick and hit and grab anything next to him and never in my wildest dreams, I thought that he would be successful in a setting with typically developing peers. I was wrong.

Tim Villegas:

The plan included examining the student's interest, communication skills, adaptive strengths. The idea was to discover who Nathan really was, what he liked and what he was good at next, the plan included planning with the general education teacher, a lesson that would take into consideration Nathan's strengths, despite all of Nathan's communication and sensory issues. He was a wizard with scissors. In fact, this is what his one of, one of his favorite things to do. If he wasn't cutting strips of paper or cardboard, he was shredding paper with his hands or picking up leaves outside and crumbling them in front of his eyes. So he could see all of the minute pieces fall to the ground. The plan began to form whatever we were going to have him do. It would involve cutting after a few more planning sessions. The day finally came and it was time for Nathan and I to walk down the long hallway to the science classroom, the activity he was to create a topography map out of cardboard.

Tim Villegas:
And luckily for Nathan, there was a whole bunch of cardboard to be cut out for them, this activity. And as he sat at the desk in the classroom with 35 of his peers, astounded at how calm and focused he was cutting to his heart's content, his task was meaningful age appropriate. And for 45 minutes in that science class, he belonged did that one activity set Nathan on a path to full inclusion? No, it didn't. But what it did do was set me on a way of believing that any student could be successful when certain conditions were present. Nathan was a turning point for me. And I looked for more ways to include my students at my school, the other teachers at my school, as well as my paraprofessionals saw the success and bought into my vision. It was like a religious conversion. And I had been baptized in the church of inclusion.

Tim Villegas:
That is how I feel when I'm talking to people about why inclusion matters over the years, I have become an evangelist of sorts, but this experience wasn't enough for the educators at my school school, or for me, my students were still segregated despite my efforts to increase their time with peers and joining their peers in and lunch, going to assemblies or the occasional visit to a general education classroom just didn't seem like enough. And I wanted to know why I couldn't include all of my students all the time. I came to work with a cognitive dissonance that I was doing what I loved, but just in the wrong location, a segregated classroom. But then I realized that I wasn't thinking big enough through talking to other teachers who were passionate about inclusion. Another vision of inclusive education began to form inclusion is not about physical proximity.

Tim Villegas:
It is about planning for the success of all students today on the podcast, we are going to talk about an aspect of what makes inclusive education successful, and that is modifying curriculum. And for my students back in Pasadena, you know, according to their IEP, the team agreed that modifying their curriculum was the best way for them to access it. Um, and essentially by modifying curriculum, it means to take part of the standard and then modify it down to where they're able to meaningfully participate in it. I talk with one, either pitcher, an intellectual disability specialist about how we can do this for our students who require a modified curriculum. Also, I want to share a resource before we get into the interview. Um, there's a book called inclusion inaction by Nicole erratics, which gives specific strategies on how to modify curriculum for students who are in general education.

Tim Villegas:
And I know a lot of educators are put into this position where they receive no training on how to do this. And while my interview with Juanita will give you a nice overview of what to look for and, um, and how to think about modifying, uh, Nicole's book really breaks it down for you. And I highly suggest that you

go and get that as a resource. So either for you who may be an educator who is in that position or for other, for people, you know, who are in that position, uh, this resource is excellent and could benefit you. So after a short break, my interview with Juanita Pritchard

Tim Villegas:
How do you know you're an inclusionist?

Tim Villegas:
In 1997, Ellen Brettlinger from Indiana university first used the term inclusionist, which for many means someone who wants to get rid of special education decades of research show better outcomes for people with disabilities when they are included and authentic inclusion is happening in schools and districts around the country, in the world, some nearing 90% inclusion or above for many years, this progress did not just happen. But as the result of careful planning led by educational visionaries and the implementation of strategies that promote effective inclusive education, it's time to bring back the moniker of inclusionist to meet and collaborator for inclusive practices, not simply someone who wants to throw the whole system away without replacing it with something better. If this resonates with you, you are an inclusionist. And do we have the newsletter for you? The weekly ish is four inclusionists subscribe@weeklyishdotsubstack.com.

Juanita Pritchard:
Hi, I'm Juanita Pritchard, and you're listening to the think inclusive podcast. [inaudible]

Tim Villegas:
I'd like to welcome Juanita Pritchard to the think inclusive podcast. Thanks for taking some time to talk with us, glad to do it. Well, let's jump right in. Why don't you to you? And I have had, um, um, a professional relationship over the last few years, uh, working together and collaborating and other things like that. Um, but I'd like for you to explain to our listeners what, um, it kind of, I'd like for you to explain to our listeners the role that you had as an intellectual disability, uh, intellectual disability specialist. So what is an intellectual disability, especially, uh, what is an intellectual disability specialist?

Juanita Pritchard:
Um, that's a good question. In my case, um, I had a very unique skillset that enabled me to support, um, teachers who had classrooms with students with intellectual disabilities. Um, and so they gave me the title of specialists because I could combine my background as a classroom teacher, community-based instructor, assistive technology specialist, um, into being able to support those teachers in their classrooms. I did primarily, um, instruction, curriculum and materials, um, helping teachers keep up the research and keep up with the materials and in the physician I last had, I was also responsible for, um, helping, uh, with budget and supplying the materials in those classrooms. I'm now retired, but that's what I did as an intellectual disability specialist.

Tim Villegas:
Okay. And did you, as in that role, did you ever support students who were not necessarily in a self-contained classroom, but were pushed out into general education environments?

Juanita Pritchard:
Uh, yes. Yes. If that was part of the IEP process where those students were, um, included in my job as an intellectual disability specialist, I did not have the opportunity, um, to support many students who were in full inclusion, but there were a number who were included for specific subject areas.

Tim Villegas:
Did you find, um, let me ask you this a different way. Um, in your experience as a intellectual disability specialist, did you see the trend of students with intellectual disabilities being pushed into inclusive environments grow or has it been, has it stayed the same over the last, however many years you've been in an educator?

Juanita Pritchard:
Well, initially it grew because I started teaching in 1977, which was the first year of public, all 94, 1 42. So I've seen a lot of trends come and go through the years. And so initially there was never any inclusion. So I did see it grow. Uh, but in the last, um, maybe five to 10 years, I've seen it stayed pretty stable. Um, it hasn't really grown the way I thought it would.

Tim Villegas:
Um, yeah. You would think that the, you would think that the, uh, I guess the, the number of students or the percentage of students being pushed into general education environments would have increased over the last 10 years. Why do you think that, that it hasn't?

Juanita Pritchard:
Well, I think, um, over the last 10 years we had a huge, uh, economic downfall and I think that had a pretty big impact in that school systems could not, um, it couldn't provide the physical support, the staff to support inclusion. Um, I think some of the grants that initially were supportive, dried up, I think, I think the economic CATA a big impact, but I also think at the same time, we had a bigger focus on standardized testing, um, for the gen ed students, as well as the special ed students. Um, and I think those two things combined have really impacted, um, some of the more innovative projects.

Tim Villegas:
What do you see? Um, I know we're jumping around when needed, but I think it's just the, the nature of the, how the conversation's going. But, um, what do you see as the future of inclusion and special education?

Juanita Pritchard:
You know, it's, to me it's very uncertain. Um, I tried to think of that, you know, before this conversation and, um, the problem is we seem to sort of be at a stalemate in education right now. I think there've been so many innovations, so many things being pushed in and tried and testing being so high stakes now, um, that I think, I think people aren't really pushing inclusion like they were, um, I think that if parents, um, kind of come together and, um, that's where the that's where it's going to happen, is it parents come together and say, this is what we think is the best thing for our students, for our children. Then I think it will happen. I don't think at this point in time, it's going to come from the educational program itself.

Tim Villegas:
Um, that's interesting. It's interesting that you say that because, um, as you know, coming from an educator perspective, I've often thought that being able to make change within a system from within a system, um, could be effective, but in your experience, um, have you ever seen that as a viable option? Have you ever seen change happen, whether it was, you know, you personally, or something that you've observed has changed ever really come from within a system?

Juanita Pritchard:
Um, I'm trying to think of how to answer this positively. Um, not as much as I would, like I am a person who, who is a lifelong learner. Um, I, as a teacher liked to respond to the, the, what research was showing, what seemed to be, you know, best practice for students, what was good for the students. But the reality that I've experienced through the years is that, um, that doesn't happen very often. Um, occasionally you get the right chemistry between administration and a teacher, so that, that can happen. But it seems like today everybody is paddling as hard they can, and innovation doesn't happen very much anymore unless it's pushed from the, an outside force. Hmm.

Tim Villegas:
Um, well, let's talk about, let's talk about the advice, um, for teachers, because like you said, whether, you know, whether the trend is going up or down, um, there are, there are right now students all across the country that have intellectual disabilities and for whatever reason are included in, um, typically co-teaching environments or environments where there's additional support. So, um, and many teachers don't know how to support those, those students with, um, with intellectual disabilities. And, um, I remember as an educator wanting to find resources and knowing kind of where to turn, to, to get information on how to serve students in, in those types of environments. Um, what advice would you give teachers who have found themselves in a situation, whether it's because of parent advocacy or because of a legal situation, um, where they are, they're having to either modify curriculum or, um, serve students with intellectual disabilities in their classroom, what advice would you give them on how to best serve, uh, those students?

Juanita Pritchard:
Um, well I think the very first thing that a teacher has to do is know what the expectations are. Um, what is it that, that the educational team wants that student to accomplish? Um, sometimes students are included strictly for social reasons. Um, and other times there's, um, specific IP reasons, reasons, and people forget that that's just a plate. That's not a reason. Um, so what is it you want from the student and how will, you know, they got there, um, the IPS first place to start if they're there because of an IEP, because that's the legal spot, but in terms of adapting materials, um, what are the student's strengths? What do they need to succeed? And usually my experience with a student and intellectual disabilities in a, in a gen ed classroom, the teachers don't understand how it can look different for that student. They want somehow to make it the same as everybody else. So the first step is what's going to be different for this student. Um, do they need visual support? Um, if we're going to learn 10 states, maybe they're going to learn one. Um, there has, it has to be okay for it to look different and then it has to be, how does that look? That's the first place to start?

Juanita Pritchard:
The other thing is that in general, students with intellectual disabilities often have communication issues of some kind, even if they're verbal, their communication skills are below their peers. And so that has to be factored in to instruction. Um, they're not just going to miraculously one day, come in and, and, you know, be answering questions in full sentences. There has to be that support. And I think that gen ed teachers, because they don't have training in that area, um, that's where they probably need a lot of support. And, you know, hopefully the speech therapist would be someone who could help, um, with those issues.

Tim Villegas:
Um, yeah, hopefully, hopefully that, uh, uh, the SLP would be able to support them the communication. So, um, w anything else, as far as next steps, so, you know, we've talked about what the expectations

are for the student. Um, if things need to be look different, look different, how, how can that, how can that teacher do that and then, uh, focus on communication. Is there anything else that, um, that a teacher should consider?

Juanita Pritchard:
Well, usually when I'm working with a teacher in that situation, I recommend that they come up with, um, I call them templates, um, some way that you want to present the material and have the student respond. Um, and if you can come up with three to five templates, um, maybe Bernie example, I might show the student a picture and have him pick out sentence strips that describe the picture. And if that template works for that student, then every new concept that I do, I will do that template with that student. So that if you have three to five, you don't have to keep reinventing the wheel. You can just plug your gen ed student material into that template. And that gives the students plenty of repetition and it cuts down on the amount of work the teacher has to do in providing materials.

Tim Villegas:
Sure. So you have a, so you ha it's like a response template, right? You have it. Okay. So, so you are giving the structure to how you, the student to respond to the content, and then you, you deliver the content that way. And then the student learns the structure so that no matter what content you put in the, the student has a, um, it doesn't have to come up with new ways of accessing the content. It's just, it's just there.

Juanita Pritchard:
Absolutely. And that research shows us, so that benefits the student, but it also greatly can benefit the teacher in cutting down the amount of time they have to spend in adapting materials.

Tim Villegas:
Right. Right. Have, have you come across, um, either it, you know, while you were working in the schools and or now that you're more of a consultant role, did you ever come across families or IDPs where you had a student, uh, included, uh, that ha that has an intellectual disability, but, um, the teams were not allowed to modify curriculum.

Juanita Pritchard:
I haven't had that experience. Um, I have had the experience where the teams, um, I don't want to say don't want to adapt, but don't understand why it has to be adapted sort of the concept of, well, if they, if they're, if they can't do the work, they shouldn't be here. Um, but I've never, I've never been in a situation. Um, because if the IEP says it has to be adapted and, and it has to be adaptive. Right.

Tim Villegas:
Um, that's just, it's just something that I wanted to ask from your personal experience, because, um, just out of curiosity, let's just, let's just say that, uh, um, okay. I

Juanita Pritchard:
Can, I can see it happening, but I haven't experienced that because, you know, hopefully you've got an IEP team, who's going to say, okay, if we're going to do this, it's going to require that thing. But

Tim Villegas:
Right, right. There, there were some, I guess, um, hypothetical situations that, um, that had been brought up. Um, and as far as on the parent advocacy side, as a strategy of how to, of how to set up

inclusion for a student with an intellectual disability, or that maybe was, you know, not at the, at that nine year range and their eligibility was STD. So, um, so the, the team wouldn't want to, um, say that they needed a modified curriculum. You see where I'm going. Right.

Juanita Pritchard:
Well, I think in that situation, I think your data would be the important part. You know, even if you just looked at the RTI process and how that goes, you know, more, more accommodations as opposed to modifications. Um, I can see that where I have seen a problem is at high school, um, in the courses that, um, there, there are teachers in certain courses that will not modify because they say, if you did this course, number it certifies a specific, um, skill level, more the vocational, uh, technology kind of courses. Um, and, and even some of the academic courses. Um, and when we used to have different in Georgia, we had different course numbers for the four. If you took a biology class with, uh, modifications, then you got a different course number. You could be in that same classroom, but your transcript didn't show that. And with that not being an option in Georgia anymore, that I have seen high school teachers not willing to make modifications. Um, but in those cases, generally it was resolved by just moving them to another course. That was, was more accommodating.

Tim Villegas:
Yeah. Why don't you tell us where people can find, uh, any materials that you've made?

Juanita Pritchard:
Well, I have a teachers pay teachers store and the name of the store is wise dragon education support. Um, I also have a Facebook page that is the same name wise dragon education support. Um, and my materials are geared towards middle and high school students, because those are the students who there just aren't materials. Everything is very, um, babyish, um, very elementary looking. And, um, so I'm focusing on, um, age respectful materials and age respectful topics. Um, particularly for students that are at emerging reading levels. I have some adaptive texts and some adapted writing activities. Um, I try to include a lot of freebies for the teachers to try materials out first. Um, but I, uh, have a lot of social skills and the workplace activities. I do think that the visit and the story that wants to

Tim Villegas:
All right. Well, thank you for sharing that with us.

Tim Villegas:
If you would like to hear the entire unedited recording of my interview with Juanita Prichard, consider becoming a Patrion subscriber at patrion.com/think inclusive podcast, follow the inclusive podcast on the web. I think inclusive.us, tell us what you thought of the podcast via Twitter at inclusive underscore pod, or find us on Facebook or Instagram. You can also subscribe to the think inclusive podcast via apple podcasts, Google play Stitcher, or on the anchor app. We love to know that you're listening. Also a reminder that you can support the think inclusive podcast via Patrion or anchor.fm with a monthly contribution so that we can continue to bring you in-depth interviews with thought leaders in inclusive education and community advocacy on that note, thank you to Patriot Donna L Kathleen T and Veronica E for their continued support of the podcast, as well as our new $1 a month Patriots every little bit helps also a special shout out to my producer and love of my life. Brianna, thanks to my boys. You know who you are for your feedback and suggestions.

Tim Villegas:
Thanks for your time and attention. See you next time.

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