



The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 10, Episode 14

Melissa Defayette | Transitioning from Teacher to Researcher

Audio Transcript

Tim Villegas

I have been told that I should cut down the time of my cold open so we can get to the interview quicker. Maybe.

My name is Tim Villegas from the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education. And you are listening to Think Inclusive, a show where with every conversation, we try to build bridges between families, educators and disability rights advocates to create a shared understanding of inclusive education, and what inclusion looks like in the real world. You can learn more about who we are and what we do at MCIE.org. For this episode, I speak with Melissa Defayette, who is a third year PhD student at the University of Maryland. She achieved candidacy in the fall of 2022. Her research is focused on creating and implementing mathematic interventions for students with moderate to severe disabilities to be used in general education settings, while aligned to grade level content. She has co authored three articles with the research team led by her advisor, Dr. Yakubova. Melissa and I discuss what it is like being on the research side versus the classroom teacher side of education, why it's so hard for general education teachers to want to change their mindset regarding students with extensive support needs, and how her inclusion journey started in middle school. And just a quick note that our interview was recorded in early 2022. Thank you so much for listening. And now my interview with Melissa Defayette. Melissa, welcome to the think inclusive podcast.

Melissa Defayette

Hi, Tim, thank you for having me.

Tim Villegas

So I'm excited about talking about your inclusion journey we or we first met or I first heard your story at the task conference, I guess it was in December of 2021. And you gave a task talk along with I was I was part of like a number of people giving test talks. So I first heard your story, and I wanted for our listeners to hear it as well. But before we get into your story, would you just introduce yourself and your role to our audience?

Melissa Defayette

Sure. So as you stated, My name is almost defy it was a special education teacher for about seven years in the State of Maryland, which provided me with practical experience working

with students with moderate to severe disabilities, fellow teachers and advocating to create inclusive educational programs for all students. But while I worked with my administrative team, MC, ie the Maryland Coalition for inclusive education, as you will know, Tim, and collaborated with my fellow teachers, I realized that I needed to educate myself further to increase my personal advocacy, education, and collaborative skills in order to support fellow teachers as we implemented inclusive practices. So about two years ago, I received an email from the special education department of my county with a flyer from my universities stating that you could apply for a fellowship to get a PhD in special education. And as a result of that, I'm currently a second year PhD student hoping to advance to candidacy this summer. And start my actual research studies, I hope to eventually influence Special Education Policy, new teacher preparation programs, or even work at a state or county level to increase inclusive education for all students.

Tim Villegas

So how how was the jump from? I don't know I'm I'm characterizing it as a jump but how was the move from teaching to now being in this fellowship?

Melissa Defayette

So it's so interesting to me because when you're a practitioner in classrooms, and you're doing the work you feel like the academic community or the research side doesn't quite understand what you're going through as a practitioner. But in academia, on the researcher side, I've come across people who feel as Though the practitioners are using the the information and the evidence based practices that they have determined to be most effective in the classrooms, so I'm kind of in between the two groups, because I can apply my practical experience to the academic world. It's very interesting. Definitely a shift, I would say it's definitely a shift.

Tim Villegas

Yeah, that is interesting. Because especially, especially for people who are advocating for inclusive education, because like, if you're in this world, you know, that we've known that inclusive education, like from a research perspective, is the right thing to do, and has evidence and evidence base for decades, right? That's

Melissa Defayette

absolutely. Right. What I'm really interested for that inclusive education piece, though, is, we have a huge evidence base, and tons of research studies that expound on the benefits of social and communication skills and interactions for students with high or complex support needs. But we do not have as wide a range of a research base for students to achieve academically and core content skills. So that's what I'm reading my synthesis on is, what are we using to increase academic achievement in students with moderate to severe disabilities in inclusive settings? And are they evidence based practices?

Tim Villegas

Does your research focus on assessment at all, like the state alternate assessments?

Melissa Defayette

So it does, it focuses on it in a way and in the manner that I want to focus on students with moderate to severe disabilities, because I feel like this population of students, all too often can be viewed by educators or administrators, or peers, neurotypical peers, as hard are, are difficult to include. And just a general education setting, I have a problem with that term, too. But so for research purposes, I've defined students with moderate to severe disabilities as having an IQ score of less than or equal to 60, low adapted scores on assessments and or both to take the state's alternate assessments, because a lot of times some of these studies I find are not including, because IQ scores is not the end all be all of your cognitive ability, it has to be combined with adaptive skills and other things. So, in that way, I'm including assessments.

Tim Villegas

Yeah, I guess that's what I guess that was? Ultimately my question was that, you know, because as an educator, that's those are the students, those are my students, you know, when I was a special education teacher, and one of the things that I always questioned was, with the alternate assessment, and this, you know, alternate standards. You know, it was framed as, you know, these these standards, even though they're modified or aligned to grade level standards in general curriculum. So you would think that if a student was included in a general education class, well, here you go, here's the modification. You know, like, we're working, we're working on us, you know, we're working about learning about a cell body. And then you look at the alternate standards, and you're like, Okay, you really only need one piece of this standard. So part of that work that educators say is so hard. It's already done for you. And, and so what and so my thinking was, oh, well, this will make it easier to include students. But what actually happened was, like, Oh, see, these students require so much modification. They don't don't belong in here. You know what

Melissa Defayette

I do? I do know what you mean. So that's why I wanted to further my education. Because I knew that personally, I can edit, modify, accommodate support, whatever the other teachers lesson or content is, if I have it in time, but I feel like I didn't have enough of a base on research knowledge and things of that nature. To be able to advocate a little better. So sometimes, my personal style is I don't know why we're talking about this. I'm just asking you to include students. Right? Like, sometimes that's just how I feel like, why do we have to talk about it? They're just kids coming to your classroom, you already have a bunch. So I was like, Oh, I gotta get a little better at that and be able to say, oh, based on research. So that's what I'm working on. But um, there was something else I was gonna say. I don't know how to say that diplomatically. So maybe I won't say that.

Tim Villegas

Well, now I'm interested. Now you have to say it

Melissa Defayette

can be edited out? Or you can make it make me fix it? Well, why

Tim Villegas

don't you say it and then maybe we can work on it and how you can say diplomatically.

Melissa Defayette

So I have found that in personal experience, general education teachers, when presented with the idea of including students who may be traditionally were not included in their classrooms previously, and specifically, general education, teachers who may have an extended career tend to be more resistant to either students who are different than what they're accustomed to changing their their content. You know, sometimes you come across somebody who's like, we absolutely, positively have to meet these standards. So we have to go at this pace. I've done it this way for five years. Okay, well, that's not really should be done. But okay. So that becomes a bit of a hurdle. Yeah.

Tim Villegas

Yeah, like, how do you how do you get around that? You know, that mindset because I think that in a, in a general education, like if, if I'm a general education teacher, and my goal is for students to achieve at a certain level, right, and let's say, I'm just going to call it high expectations, I have high expectations for my students, they're going to achieve grade level standards, they are going to, you know, do well on state tests, and, you know, district assessments and blah, blah, blah. And, you know, so you have students who learn at a slower pace. I mean, that's, you know, I mean, may or may not learn at a slower pace than threatens, you know, your expectation of your class. Right.

Melissa Defayette

So I think that's a great observation. And it kind of leads me back to some sometimes My head spins with all the ideas that I'm gathering and want to consider the future thinking of inclusion. So teachers are held to teaching particular content standards and curriculum requirements based on grade level expectations. And standardized assessments, whether it's county level, state level, whatever, right. But why are we pushing all students to achieve standard? Why are we not pushing all students to demonstrate growth towards a at a predetermined target. So what? So this is where my interest in kind of policies and procedures falls in? Because why are we treating education like, you have to reach this finish line to say that you are educated or knowledgeable or ready to enter the workforce. And we're not focusing on grow personal growth and understanding of concepts. And if that means that I learn it through watching videos, and my my products are posters, or electronic PowerPoint presentations, where you learn it through reading and writing, and your products, our essays, and, you know, whatever. Just why why do we push students that way? Why do we use those words like standard standardized, normal, regular general? I don't know. philosophical question.

Tim Villegas

Those are great questions. I love those questions. I love that you were saying, you said something. We recently talked to somebody, and they use the term meritocracy. And I really, I really did have to like, Wait, like, Okay, what does that mean? And then, but, but that is it though, right? Like, we have a meritocracy, you have to achieve a certain, quote, unquote, level

or standard to be even considered for a particular job or whatever. Like, they won't even let you in the door to interview. Right. Right. Right. Right. So yeah, I think we do need to rethink those things. So I think, you know, I think you're the exact person that that should be thinking through those things. I mean, that's, that's why you're in. Yeah, that's why you have your fellowship. Right?

Melissa Defayette

Exactly. That's, that's what I'm trying to do. And the more experience or TA in a course or talk to people, the more I want to know. So as a new teacher, I knew that I wanted my students not really my staff, our students that I knew I wanted them to be included. Right. And so when I showed up my first day of teaching, my first week of teaching, you know, I got all these Oh, you know, Melissa, you're doing great. I can't believe you're a first year teacher cetera and Silwan that that when I started saying things like my classrooms on the fourth grade team, how can the entire fourth grades going on a field trip? But my classrooms not going on a field trip? Oh, we don't usually. What, what? You can't tell me that my students are going on a field trip. I'm sorry, I will file like I had to be that loud voice. That was, you know, a little assertive, I guess. And now I'm doing more research. And I'm learning more by being out here in this kind of academic world. And I'm realizing that people with disabilities can be paid less on average, than typical people, I guess, I don't know. Living concerns are huge. We have the ABA, but there are still transportation systems and buildings that have not been either retrofitted or rebuilt. I don't know, do what you have to do. I know, you say it's a budget problem, but we're truly not including everybody, as a society. Right. And so part of me hopes, wishes, dreams, that if we can start inclusive education at a younger age and educate students in an environment where all are welcome and appreciated for all learning differences, because we all have them that we can start to change this societal construct is disability and make a larger impact.

Tim Villegas

What What started you on this path toward advocating for inclusive education?

Melissa Defayette

It was in the 80s. I'm in middle school. thinking I'm cool. It was the 80s. I obviously was not all of them are coming back. So that's right. 80s are back for that. And I went to like my first middle school dance and this and this guy comes up, I didn't know when you go to your middle school dance, like everybody stands on one side of the room, and kind of looks at each other awkwardly. Makes more sense now as an adult, but um, this guy comes up and he asked me to dance like this kid my age, he's like, do you want to dance? And I was like, Yeah, sure. I love to dance, let's dance. So it was like us and a couple other people dancing on the actual dance floor. And I literally asked him being clueless. Like, why are you here? Like, how did you get here? Like this is for a particular grade level, and within the school, and he's like, I go to school here. And I said, when I said, but I've never seen you. And, um, when I went to junior high, we really, like we just kind of roam the halls, your classes were wherever I feel like it wasn't quite as organized as Junior High in middle school is now. So I honestly felt like I would have seen this person previously. And he's like, Well, I go here, but I just go to a different classroom. And then later, my friends were like, he's special education. And I said, I don't even know what that

means. But I could tell by their their like demeanor, that it wasn't a good thing. And I said, Well, I mean, that's not really fair. Like if he's getting something special. I was such a book nerd. If he's getting something special, and I'm not. That's not there.

Tim Villegas

Wait a minute, wait a minute. Special. Wait a minute.

Melissa Defayette

You know, I was like, why early team, maybe pre team. I was just like, what is happening? He gets to go somewhere else. And I'm picturing like, he's got all the books in the world. I don't know what you know, like I said, I love to read at the time. So I was probably a little awkward, but I was so confused by it. And then as I started learning more about it, I was like, what doesn't even make sense? Because he's just like us, like, you know, he had a head, he had two arms, two legs, just another kid. So why would he get his education in a separate spot than I would have? And that's kind of what started the whole process for me, in addition to having a cousin, who, you know, I now realize, I mean, obviously, before I realized, but as a kid, it didn't occur to me. She has a disability. We used to talk all the time, people used to say to me, Oh, you're so nice hanging out with her. She was just fun. You just caught along. And then yeah, so I just kind of kept that in the back of my mind. I was not a person who was ready to attend college right out of high school. So it took me a little longer than traditional formats. But I ended up where I'm supposed to be, I believe. Yeah.

Tim Villegas

Yeah, I would say so. I would say so. That is so interesting. Did you have other experiences like that with that, that disconnect? Like the more you went to school, or by the time you got to like high school, you're like, Oh, those those are the quote unquote, special education because

Melissa Defayette

I went to school. Because I went to so I think the education of Handicapped Children Act was released in 75. Maybe. So, you know, I kind of started my academic career was the end of that decade. And when school through the 80s and early 90s. There was still this definite, less inclusive experience for special education. We didn't really start to look at inclusion and more inclusive experiences until probably 2004 When ide a was I think it was reauthorized. And they talk about the least restrictive environment, which was actually mentioned first time in 75. But they also talk about flooding all students to take standardized assessments and how it can affect and how it can affect schools and their ratings and things of that nature. So then people started to get like, oh, maybe we should start focusing more on academics instead of functional, if some of these students are going to be taking these standardized assessments, right, right. And that's when that push came. So while I was in high school, even in high school, there were students who were kind of away,

Tim Villegas

I have this, I have this theory about that time period, because that is right when 2004 was right when I started teaching. So that was like, my first, my first teaching job was 2004. And I had

other than school other than, like, my teaching education program, I had no experience with special education, or, you know, I went to private school, you know, I had no, right, no concept, right? Of the law or anything. And, and so accountability measures, No Child Left Behind stuff like that was kind of like I came into, I came into education, with that being in the forefront of everything. And reflecting on it, I always thought that that really slowed inclusion down because of what you said, it's like, the schools are now accountable for, you know, not 100% of students with disabilities. Oh, I mean, they're taking the taking the typical standard assessment, and the 1% is taking that alternate assessment. But the majority of the kids that have IEPs, right, are all taking the regular assessment. So it's like, well, we have to do something special or different for these students to catch them up. You know, so my theory, and I don't, you know, I don't know if it's true or not, but my guess is that that slowed inclusion down. And so when you see those percentages, about the growth from like, the 80s, to 90s, to 2000, like we grew a lot in that LR LRE a percentage, but then after 2000 To 2010 to 2020. It's just like, really, really, really slow. So that's just my idea. But I don't know if that's right. Me.

Melissa Defayette

I think that's, I mean, I think that's a valid observation. Definitely no one want to go back and look at the numbers. I mean, I live in this little research world of mine, to see if there's any idea there. But I mean, that could be because there was this emphasis put on special education, like we are specially designing instruction, but the problem is it wasn't focused on instruction, was focused on location, and location does not equal special education. Has nothing to do with where you're at. Yeah, nothing. Right? We can all get educated anywhere, anywhere. Museums, the zoo, card trips, I mean, it just doesn't matter. So whether you're in a general education or a special education classroom shouldn't matter. I obviously, there are students that have specialized healthcare needs, and other things that they may have to have a certain location to access those types of resources. But for the most part, we can include pretty much almost everybody, I think,

Tim Villegas

yeah, yeah, yeah. People don't like when you say all, Melissa,

Melissa Defayette

I know they don't they know they're like

Tim Villegas

that not Oh,

Melissa Defayette

what about? No, no, I said, Oh, but what about and I'll be honest with you. I have friends who are educators who who teach a range of varying abilities in special education, and I have had some very invigorating conversations about but why not?

Tim Villegas

What gives you what gives you hope? As a educator and researcher,

Melissa Defayette
that gives me hope.

I have to believe I have to believe that now, hold on, let me think about this, for sure.

Tim Villegas
Take your time want to be

Melissa Defayette
I have hope in the fact that the United States as a nation, historically, has continued to change its public school system to become more inclusive, meaning started with young, white males. Eventually, we started including females. Then we had the Civil Rights Movement, which helps with racial and ethnic disparities. And then individuals with disabilities started getting some representation and some, some more educational opportunities through that civil rights movement starting there really, prior to that, a lot of people were institutionalized, which I don't know if you've read up on this, but it's horrifying. So my, my hope lies in the fact that we can change. Right? And if we continue to grow this community of people like myself and you and MCI II and, and fellow teachers, whether they're general or special, I don't care, fellow related service providers, Administrator, administrative teams, and people that advocate at the political level, like for policies and procedures, if we can do that, we can make this change. That's where my hope lies. I despair lies in the fact that it's so slow. And I don't know how to help support personally to help support huge societal change, where we stop asking, how are we going to include somebody and just pause and look around and say, Wait a minute, why isn't so and so here?

Tim Villegas
Melissa, defy it. Thank you so much for being on the thick inclusive podcast. We appreciate your time.

Melissa Defayette
Thank you guys.

Tim Villegas
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