

# Inclusion in the classroom: How does it really happen?



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### *Abstract*

This study focuses on what a teacher can do to help learning support children that receive little or no support outside of the classroom. Child engagement is essential to a classroom-learning environment. For some children it is hard to stay engaged in school throughout the day. As a teacher, I find it important to accommodate these children to the best of my ability.

## ***Introduction***

I am a 2006 Professional Development School intern in a self-contained second grade classroom at Park Forest Elementary. I am in a classroom of seventeen children and three adults. The following paragraphs provide some background information to help the reader better understand the context in which this inquiry took place.

Park Forest Elementary is a new school that was opened for the first time this school year. The children who attend Park Forest Elementary are from the close surrounding area and take a bus or walk to school.

The children in the classroom come from homes of middle class to upper middle class. There is one child in the class whose parents are separated and whose mother is remarried. The other sixteen children live with both parents. Many of the parents in the room are professors at the local university and some of the parents are doctors.

The children in the room are predominately White American. There are five children who come from different backgrounds. One child is Korean, one child is Greek, one child is Muslim, and two children are of Mixed Race.

There are many strong readers in the classroom. There are two children who receive Title One support. Two children attend school in the evening and weekends to learn another language. There are no children in the classroom who are learning English as a Second Language. Mathematically, the children also show much strength. The children in the class can easily manipulate numbers and envision problems in their head. There are only two children struggling with mathematics.

One student in the room particularly stood out to me early this year. Sam is an emotional needs child in the classroom. Sam has trouble communicating with other

children in the classroom. He appears to have trouble knowing how to interact with children appropriately. This is evident during group activities when Sam begins making odd noises with no context and behaves in ways that make other children feel uncomfortable. Sam receives little support from people outside our classroom. He does receive occupational therapy and a para-professional helps during math. Sam is pulled out of the classroom thirty minutes a day for reading.

At the beginning of the school year, Sam received no outside support. There was an IEP meeting at the beginning of the year and his parents refused any outside support. During the month of February, Sam's IEP was reopened and extra support was added. Since that time, Sam has been receiving support to help him be more successful in the classroom.

### ***Rationale***

When I began the student teaching program in August, my mentor told me about a child we would be having in the classroom. She told me I would need to be aware of this child and for the first few days she would like me to keep an eye on him and keep him on task. I was intrigued by this situation. Sam intrigued me because he is only 8 years old and instead of people trying to help him, they just seem to want to control him. From the beginning of the year, I began establishing a relationship with Sam.

During the fall semester, I did a case study observation (Appendix A) to see what I could do to help Sam. During the case study, I discovered that Sam has some strength in the classroom, but his weaknesses interfered with his overall success. As a result of the case study, I found that Sam is receptive to positive interaction with an adult, but he cannot transfer the positive relationship from that situation into other situations.

Throughout the year, I have been wondering how I could help Sam be more successful inside and outside the classroom. This has led to my inquiry: what can a “regular education” teacher do to help a child with special needs who receives little or no outside support in an inclusion classroom?

It is important as a member of a service profession to provide the services I am educated to provide to the best of my abilities. In the Penn State Education program, an undergraduate is required to take one special education course, but I believe it is impossible to learn all the necessary information in a sixteen-week course. Therefore, I decided to investigate what I will need to do in the future when I have a classroom of my own, in order to meet the needs of any child I may have enter the door. When I know strategies to help the children with special needs in my classroom, I will feel more comfortable helping them, and I will be more effective as an educator. Discovering this information will not only help me as a professional in the education field, it will also help children with special needs be more successful in the inclusion classroom. The children will benefit from me being more knowledgeable because I can give them skills to help them in my classroom and in the world outside of the classroom.

### ***Wonderings***

- *Main Question*
  - What can a “regular education” teacher do to help a child with special needs that receive little or no outside support in an inclusion classroom?
- *Sub Questions*
  - What kinds of support do children with special needs receive?

- What happens when the parents refuse the support the school district offers?
- Should a teacher be persistent of getting more support for a child or just provide support in the classroom?
  - What does a teacher need to do to be persistent?
- How can a teacher compliment the support in the classroom?
- What kinds of services are available for a child with special needs and his/her parents?
- How are parents notified about what is going on at school?
- How do you provide support for a child with special needs without neglecting the other children in the room?

### ***Inquiry vs. Project***

This project is an inquiry project because it is based on information that I do not know and I want to find out to better myself as a professional. It will also improve my classroom. I had no idea of the end result at the beginning of the process. This is a question that is always under investigation because there is not one answer and new approaches are developed and revised through trial and error.

### ***Inquiry Process***

- *Step 1*
  - Begin observing the child being studied

During this part of the process I observed the child. I observed different aspects of his behavior academically and socially. I just took notes on any information I noticed that was different from the other children in the room.

- *Step 2*

- Look at notes from observations

I looked at the notes I took during step 1 to look for common behaviors to target for improvement. There was then a need to summarize the notes to combine similar findings.

- *Step 3*

- Seek professional for advice

I interviewed professionals to learn what is important to focus on and how to target those behaviors. There are interview questions that are targeted to the original wonderings.

- *Step 4*

- Compare professional responses

After all the interviews had been completed, it was important to compare what the different professionals had to say about the topic.

- *Step 5*

- Implement strategy and observe behavior

Now it was important to begin implementing the interventions to address the targeted behavior. It was important to target only one behavior at a time and stay consistent throughout the different interventions.

- *Step 6*

- Compare data from interventions

Once the interventions had been implemented for a desired

period of time, it was time to compare the data from the interventions and find which intervention seemed to produce the desired behavior.

- *Step 7*
  - Write paper

Write the paper that summarized all the information gathered during the inquiry. I organized the paper in a logical sequence that relates to the development of the process.

### ***Data Collection***

The data collected was student work, interviews, field notes, and notes from seminars. The data was collected over a sustained period of time, and I analyzed it, as necessary, throughout the process.

When I completed the case study during the fall semester, I took field notes on Sam's behavior. Those notes were also important for this inquiry process. During the course of the inquiry, I took additional notes about Sam and other interactions in the classroom.

When I decided to do this inquiry I examined the case study paper that I did on the child in the fall. In the case study paper, I was looking for behaviors that I noticed about Sam and how those behaviors influenced his learning environment. I printed out that paper and highlighted the important parts that could now become part of the inquiry. Then I took notes on Sam's behavior during a one-hour period of time to see what types of things he did to distract his learning. I sat across the room and acted as though I was working while my mentor was teaching.

Next, I began collecting some of Sam's work. I know that Sam struggles to put what he is thinking into words, so I collected some of his writing examples. When I was examining his writing, I was looking for the amount of writing and if the structure was clear to the reader. Many times when Sam writes he needs help, so I have him tell me what he wants to write, then I try to keep him on task to write what he told me. When I went back and read his writing, I noticed many gaps in his writing. This could have become the focus, however I wanted to go deeper into the reason why he did not write the story he told me. I noticed that he gets frustrated and gives up many times when he is writing. So I came up with an interview for Sam to figure out why he had trouble writing.

Sam's interview was done one morning when he arrived at school. I took him to a table and asked him questions in a casual way so he did not feel pressured. Once we were finished, I took the interview and analyzed the responses to figure out what the next step should be. I decided the next thing I should do is interview the professionals to get advice on how to help Sam.

The interviews with the professionals become a discussion. I entered with questions and the conversation led to discussion and I jotted down answers as we spoke. After the interviews, I went back and typed the notes I jotted into the questions. The interviews were based on the wonderings I had at the beginning of the inquiry process.

I took a survey before I started the inquiry to discover what I knew about inclusion, and I took the same survey at the end of the inquiry to see if I am more knowledgeable as professional helping children with special needs in the classroom.

The data collection method was primarily anecdotal records. I recorded the responses to the interviews and also summarized the information obtained from the seminar on children with special needs.

### ***Data Analysis***

- *Student work (Appendix B)*

I made copies of the student's work. Then I took the work home and began looking for patterns. I found patterns in his writing and his math work. His writing did not have a sequential story. The math work was counting by ones. For his explanation in one problem, he wrote, "I watched somebody else's paper." These pieces of information were important to analyze because it showed his level of work in the classroom.

- *Interviews (Appendix C)*

I began by interviewing Sam to figure out why he had such trouble in school. I interviewed him in a casual way. I also made sure the interview did not require Sam to write because that is the area that he struggles with most in the classroom. Once I gave him the interview, I examined it to find out what he thought about school and what the teachers could do to help him. The most important things I discovered from his interview is that he is angry before and during school and the only way teachers can help is help him do the work.

After my interview with Sam, I realized that I had no real idea of how to help him, so I went to other people in the profession. I interviewed the Instructional Support Team (IST) teacher in the building and a senior special education major at Penn State University. I also took notes from a seminar on special education. I jotted down notes on

all the information I received through the discussions, then I typed it and compared all the interviews to find commonalities.

- *Field notes (Appendix D)*

I took hand written notes during the school day when I saw it was appropriate. Then when I got home, I typed those notes into my computer. I kept a running list of those notes, and when it was time to analyze I printed out the typed notes. Once I had the hard copies of the notes, I began looking for progress in Sam's behavior. It was important to analyze the data at the end because it kept me trying different interventions rather than staying with one intervention as soon as there was an effect.

- *Interventions (Appendix E)*

Unfortunately, there were limitations that factored into my inquiry project, and I could not implement all the interventions. The first limitation was that mid-way through the inquiry; Sam began receiving outside support for his needs. Another limitation was that my mentor strongly disagrees with a rewards system. My mentor believes that rewards become the focus of activities and the importance become less valid. So I found it difficult to implement a rewards system for Sam in the classroom, which was one of the strategies the special education specialists had recommended.

As a result of the limitations, I decided to ask the IST teacher for examples of interventions I could use in my classrooms in the future. Unlike my mentor, I believe a rewards system might be appropriate in some cases. The IST also uses a rewards system. I reviewed the information the IST provided and analyzed that information. She said the important part is that the intervention should be based on the child. So, based on what I observed of Sam, I would implement a student checklist. It would best meet Sam's needs

because it would keep him on task and it does not require a lot of writing. Of course, without actually implementing the intervention, I do not know if it would work, but based on the information obtained through my inquiry, this is what I would begin implementing.

There were a few interventions I was able to implement with Sam. I implemented these interventions during instruction. These interventions may have been a result of other factors that were introduced in the classroom, such as the support by the paraprofessionals in the room, however I believe the evidence supports the direct intervention. I have provided a chart that shows the intervention implemented and the observation of the intervention.

Intervention	Observation
1. Proximity control	Field notes showed evidence of greater attention to task
2. Sitting Sam at the back of the group	Field notes show Sam pays greater attention when he is sitting at the back of the group.
3. Providing Sam individualized attention when appropriate	Letter of recommendation from Sam is evidence that Sam appreciates the help.
4. Modified work	Sam's math samples show he can perform the task individually when the numbers are manageable for him.

***Findings***

***Claim1: Some children with special needs are more difficult to motivate than other children.***

I began the school year unprepared for the motivational needs of a child like Sam. According to the instructional support teacher in my building, the most effective

interventions are based on the child's interests. She said it is important to find out what those interests are and base rewards on them. The interests could be school-based, such as extra reading time or lunch with the teacher, or they could be student-based, such as snacks. Another strategy is to talk with parents to have a reward that extends into the student's home life. Sometimes parents are helpful, but other times parents are not receptive.

Children with special needs become isolated when a teacher gives them different work than the rest of the class. Teachers should keep this in mind and include children with special needs in the classroom as much as possible. "Other class members may make it clear that what the pupil with special needs is struggling with is well within [the helping student's] own competence, even if they are only "helping" to read an instruction or complete an activity." (Chazan, 1991, p. 228) Children notice when a teacher offers support to a child with special needs and the students may then begin to isolate that child. It is important for a teacher to offer opportunities for children with special needs to be interacting with other children. We were eventually able to include Sam in a collaborative learning group.

***Evidence:***

Discovering what would serve as a reward for Sam required me to analyze evidence from my case study, statements from the in-depth interview with the student, and continuous observations at various times throughout the school day. Because Sam's parents will not acknowledge his special needs, it was impossible to find a reward that would extend into his home life.

I was also concerned some information I gained from Chazan (1991), explaining that when teachers are obvious about their rewards, children with special needs may become isolated. My field notes showed that several times after I began working individually with Sam, other students would ask, “Why don’t you eat lunch with us?” or “Why do you always help Sam?”

***Claim 2: A student with special needs requires teachers to evaluate themselves as well as their students.***

A teacher should constantly evaluate what he/she is doing to improve the learning of a child with special needs in the classroom. “Evaluation is essential when innovation has taken place. If support is given within the classroom instead of withdrawing children for different work, pertinent questions must be asked so that future decisions as to provision can be as firmly based as possible.” (Chazan, 1991, p. 231) It is important to evaluate what is happening with the child so a teacher can change what needs to be changed to better meet the needs of the child.

Elmore (1999) also supports the statement by Chazan and adds, “teacher’s own judgments about their ability to affect the learning of their students governs the teachers’ willingness to take responsibility for improving student learning and to change their practice to make such improvements come about” (p. 97). The teacher needs to take responsibility for the learning of children with special needs in his/her room. A teacher can take responsibility by evaluating the success of the methods used.

***Evidence:***

Comparing the findings of my case study with my field notes, I realized that Sam could not transfer the positive interactions into another situation in the classroom. This made it evident that I needed to evaluate my own methods to see how he could establish that same personal relationship in the classroom. I was able to take this information and apply it to the classroom setting. By working with Sam during math choice time and spending extra time with him during reading group, I was able to maintain our strong personal relationship in the classroom setting. Sam's comments about our relationship when he and his classmates wrote recommendations for me, was further evidence of the strength of this relationship.

***Claim 3: Teacher expectations should be clear, particularly to students with special needs.***

Ainscow (2004) believes teachers should make their goals clear to all students. When a child has a goal to obtain they are more likely to obtain it because they know the expectations the teacher is setting. A teacher should also tell why students are expected to do something (Ainscow, 2004). When I interviewed the special education major, she emphasized the importance of the teacher making expectations clear to the student. (See Appendix C) Many times, Sam did something that was contrary to teacher expectations. When I would ask him why he had behaved in that way, he had no idea why we told him it was inappropriate. It became apparent to me that some students need more direct, explicit explanations of what we mean by *appropriate*.

***Evidence:***

I realized this claim as I evaluated myself as part of this inquiry. I reviewed field notes and informal comments by my mentor and PDA that showed I was not making expectations clear to Sam. The evidence showed that I had no idea why the children did not understand my attempts to praise or correct them. Reviewing field notes after I came to this understanding showed that when I thought carefully and made the expectations clear to Sam he responded appropriately.

***Claim 4: People need to work together as a team to enhance learning for children with special needs.***

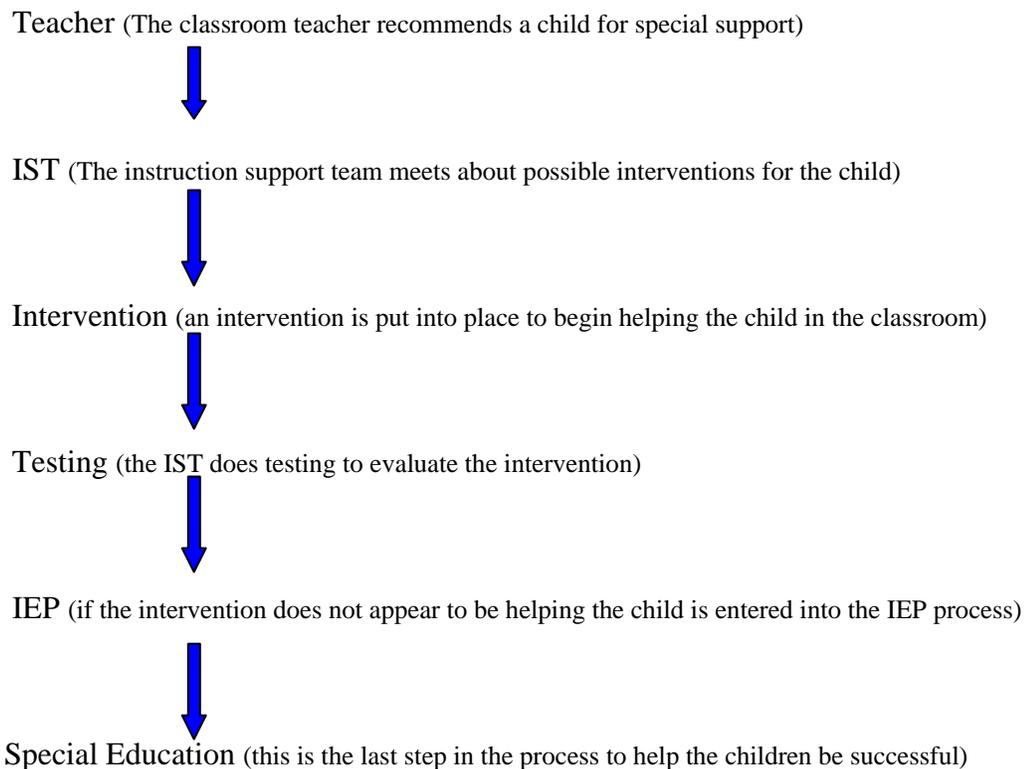
There is a process that it is important to follow when a teacher is trying to get help for a student with special needs. That process requires great collaboration from all the professionals involved. A flow chart that describes this process is provided in the evidence section of this claim.

It is hard to meet the needs of diverse students even in a regular classroom setting. When a child with special needs joins the classroom, the teacher must be more willing to work together for the best student outcomes. When a teacher works together with other teachers, it allows for more opportunities to find resources that work. “Moreover, school-level accountability was designed to encourage teachers to work together to improve instruction...” (Elmore, 1999, p. 93). When the school is held more accountable, teachers find working together is essential for helping a child with special needs succeed. I learned that by collaborating with my mentor, learning support teachers, and other staff I could come up with ideas I would have never thought of on my own.

***Evidence:***

After I recorded my interview and analyzed the interviews with the IST and Special Education teacher, I began to realize that alone I could never generate the number and quality of ideas I could with the help and experience of these experts. Even though I was somewhat limited in the ideas I could implement this year, what I did try had an impact. For example, the IST emphasized the importance of building personal relationships. This strategy allowed Sam to become a valued member of the classroom community. In addition, I have strategies to use in the future for my own classroom that might have otherwise taken years to discover.

Flow chart of the process that is followed to get support for a child with special needs:



***Claim 5: Children with special needs often require a more controlled learning environment to be successful.***

Kauffman (2005) presents research showing “that for students who have problems in learning, the most effective instructional practices are direct and teacher-controlled” (p. 69). Children with special needs often have trouble staying on task and the teacher can help by providing controlled environments to keep the children on task. A teacher can do this in a variety of ways. The most effective way I found to control the environment during whole group instruction was proximity control. Sam responded particularly well to this strategy.

***Evidence:***

Reviewing my field notes, I noticed how important proximity control was to Sam. When Sam would get off task, I would move toward him and immediately he regained self-control and re-engaged in the activity. Once I discovered this in my field notes, I began my other claims and evidence and realized that part of the reason these strategies were effective was because of the personal relationship I have been able to establish with Sam.

***New Wonderings***

- Would it help Sam if I shared the interventions provided by the IST and other experts with next year’s teacher?
- Have I learned enough to know how to find out what interests and motivates my students, and how can I continue to grow in this area?
- Is there a way to bring Sam’s parents in as a support system even though they refuse outside intervention?

## *Conclusions*

Through this inquiry project, I have learned that a regular classroom teacher is an important person in the success of a child with special needs. The teacher is important because he/she works with the child the most during a school day. When a child is recommended for special support, a teacher has to keep in contact with the parents and with the child's support teachers.

Whether a parent provides additional support or not, a teacher must help the student succeed within the classroom. If the child has an IEP, the classroom teacher is legally obligated to fulfill the components of the IEP. A school district will not support a teacher that neglects to fulfill the IEP. However, beyond this, there is a moral obligation to provide a student with special needs the same chance of success that other students can expect in the classroom.

The child's interest can play an important role when implementing an intervention. When the child's interests are considered, the intervention is more effective because the child is working toward his/her own goals. A teacher can find what interests the child by doing a survey or asking the child. A teacher should also consider the child's strengths and weaknesses in the classroom when implementing an intervention.

Finally, a teacher needs to be educated about the resources available in the district where he/she works. Every district provides different levels of support for children with special needs. Other teachers and expert personnel can often provide strategies and information a teacher acting alone might never discover.

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