

Inclusive Education: Learning for All



When Cindy's husband Jim was offered a promotion within his company that involved a move to Shanghai, they both jumped at the chance. They were enticed by the salary, benefits, and multiple travel opportunities this job would provide. Coming from the public school system in their home state of Michigan, they didn't even think twice about the fact that schooling for their son, Connor, could prove to be a problem. Connor had an identified learning disability, and getting him into an international school turned into an impossibility.

"When Connor was at his school in Michigan, he had support services provided by the school district. A special educator came into his classroom three days a week for forty minutes at a time to work with him and several others on reading comprehension and reading fluency," says Cindy. Connor was also pulled out of the classroom two times a week to see a speech therapist to help with his vocabulary development, social skills, and language pragmatics. "This is so normal in America, that I just never even considered it would be a problem when applying to international schools," Cindy explained.

In America, "The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) define the

rights of students with dyslexia and other specific learning disabilities. These individuals are legally entitled to special services to help them overcome and accommodate their learning problems." (*International Dyslexia Association, 2012*)

So, one can imagine Cindy's surprise when she started searching the web-pages of schools she was interested in having Connor attend in Shanghai. Most stated that they would not accept students who had identified learning disabilities. "They blamed it on a lack of resources. They said that they couldn't support students with needs and some even said that parents should consider staying in their home countries rather than bringing them to Shanghai."

That was 2005. Cindy did not end up bringing Connor to Shanghai due to the lack of appropriate services at the time. "We had to pass up our dream to do what was right for our son. I don't regret it, but I still feel disappointed that schools could not, or would not, accommodate his needs."

Cindy was looking for an inclusive classroom in an inclusive school. She wanted a classroom where students with learning disabilities learn alongside students without disabilities. Inclusive classrooms are set up both physically and educationally to support all learners. Every child has a right to an education, to belong, and to be accepted into a school community.

Inclusive classrooms are beneficial for all students. Students with special learning needs learn alongside their peers and benefit from a challenging instructional level. Unlike self-contained classrooms where children with needs only socialize with children who have similar learning needs, students in inclusive classrooms socialize with their typical peers and learn from consistent, positive peer modeling.

The benefits of inclusion for students without special learning needs are plentiful. Students learn that we live in a diverse world and understand how to get along with all people. They develop empathy as they appreciate and accept others into their classroom community. Working with students who learn differently can be difficult, but ultimately, this is real life. As students graduate and enter the work force, they find themselves in an environment where people accomplish tasks differently than themselves. With inclusion, students get a head start on this skill. The biggest benefit, however, comes from the instruction. In an inclusive classroom, a trained special educator co-teaches with the regular classroom teacher. They plan their lessons together and are able to determine how to differentiate the lessons for the individual

learners in their classroom for all students; the ones who need extra support as well as the students who need to be challenged.

An inclusive classroom provides the students with the tools they need for success. James, a student with ADHD and sensory processing disorder, sits on an exercise ball to help provide the sensory input he needs to stay focused. Kaylene wears noise cancellation headphones to balance out the extraneous noises in the room. These help her focus on her teacher's voice and not the sound of the air conditioner or outside noises. Stanley uses voice to text software to dictate his essays as his writing disability prohibits him from writing down his thoughts in a fluent and organized manner. Abby, a student who has poor reading comprehension, has her social studies test read aloud to her so she can show her learning. In this way she is showing her learning of the social studies concepts rather than her reading ability. Running an inclusive classroom takes talented, committed individuals who believe that all children have this right, as it is a difficult endeavor. The inclusive classroom encourages students to show their learning through their strengths while building upon their challenges.

There are many positive outcomes for students with needs who are placed in an inclusive setting, but are there any positives for 'typical' learners? Yes, according to Kristen Pelletier, Head of Learning Support at the International School of Brussels: "Students who have exposure, education, and guidance about how people learn differently acquire a skill set that enables them to



work more effectively in teams, and to understand that every member has something to offer, precisely because of their difference. All members of an inclusive community have a reduced fear of human differences, which becomes evident in their interactions with people within the school and wider community."

Many schools in the Asia region have been successfully servicing students with mild learning needs for over a decade. In 2002 a group of international teachers created the Special Education Network In Asia (SENIA) to create a network forum for any professionals working with children with special educational needs in Asia. Since that time, they have held a yearly conference in different parts of the continent that includes educators, professionals and parents dedicated to supporting children with special learning needs. This support network is vital to both professionals and parents who find themselves alone in their tireless advocacy for their students.

The momentum of inclusion is growing. "Having collaborated with many



international school leaders over the years, I have clearly seen a shift in the thinking in regard to accepting and supporting students who learn differently. For a growing number of schools the shift has been from 'Should we?' to 'How should we?'," says Pelletier in a 2013 article.

In the past few years, Shanghai and other major cities globally have witnessed a shift in attitude and acceptance regarding including students with special learning needs in their international schools.

This is encouraging news for families such as Cindy's. The next time a job opening comes up for John in another country, they may actually get to go with the confidence that Connor will get the education he deserves.

BY LORI BOLL

Resources

Pelletier, K. (2013, April 19). *Who Are Our Schools For? The Case for Inclusion*. Retrieved October 20, 2014.