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perspective

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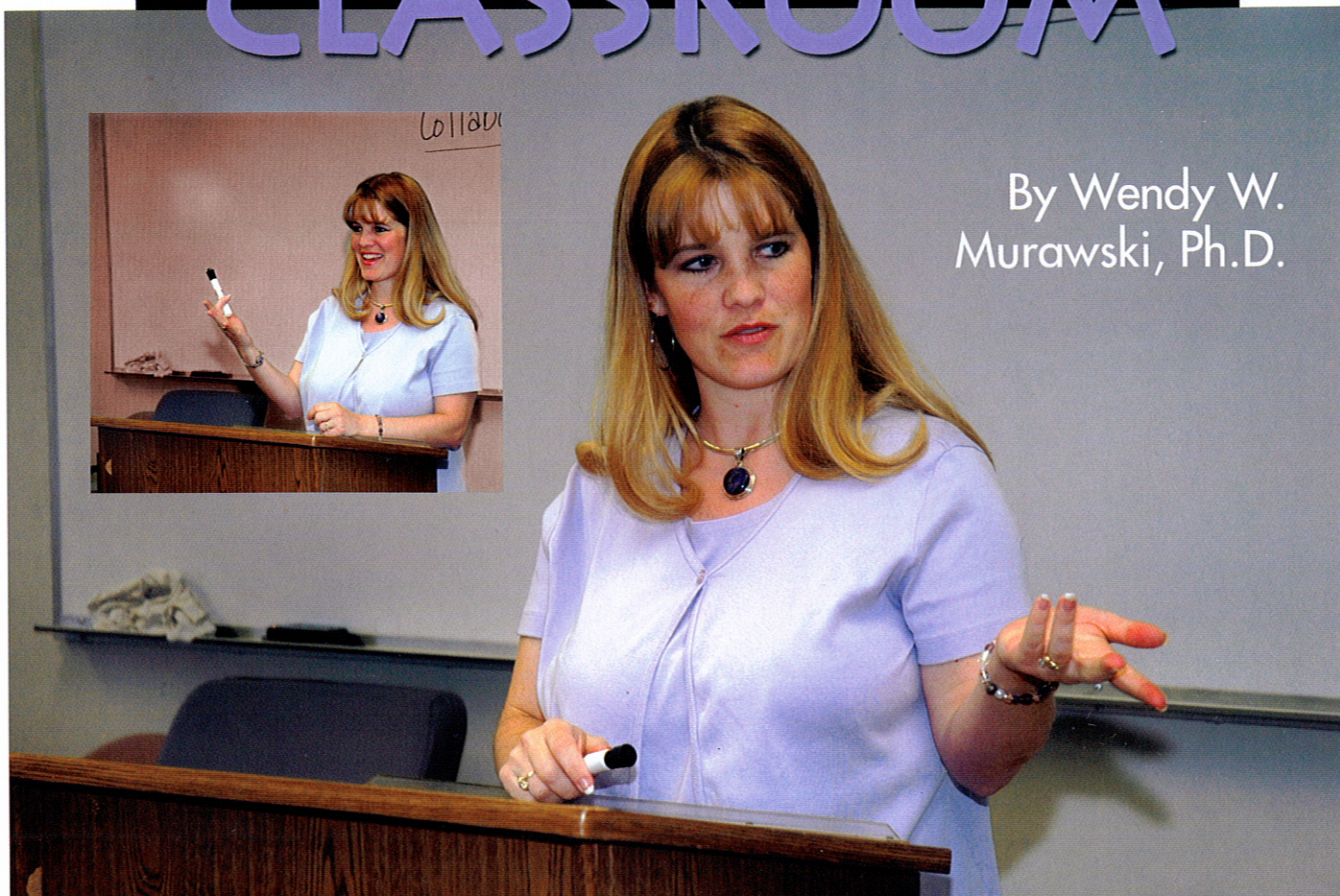
LAUNCHING CAMP OUTLOOK

**OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY,
SENSORY INTEGRATION
& AUTISM**



A GLIMPSE INTO THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

By Wendy W.
Murawski, Ph.D.



Inclusion represents a philosophy that all students have the right to be educated together and to have their particular needs met in the classroom with their same-age peers. When done correctly, I believe that inclusive classrooms are the perfect place for the majority of individuals with disabilities, to include those children on the Autism spectrum.

As a professor of special education, my particular areas of interest are collaboration and co-teaching, especially as they relate to inclusive education. Often, I find myself observing in schools where administrators or faculty state that they are "inclusive" or that they "have inclusion" and find that this is not the case. Having one or two situations in which kids with disabilities are physically integrated with their peers is not sufficient. Inclusion is not a place; it is not even a particular service. Inclusion represents a philosophy that all students have the right to be educated together and to have their particular needs met in the classroom with their same-age peers. When done correctly, I believe that inclusive classrooms are the perfect place for the majority of individuals with disabilities, including those children on the Autism spectrum.

Effective inclusion efforts are based on four primary principles. They are the acceptance of diversity, the willingness to address individual needs, the use of reflective practice, and the encouragement of collaboration (Salend, 2001). General and special education teachers today are being prepared to teach in such classrooms. Teacher educators at the university level (such as myself) recognize that future teachers will be expected to meet the needs of students with a variety of abilities and disabilities in the same classroom and are doing their best to prepare these future teachers. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the philosophy of inclusion, the reality is that classrooms today are incredibly heterogeneous and teachers need to be prepared to teach effectively with these populations. However, what about those who have been teaching a long time? Or teachers who have not been trained in the best practices of inclusive education? Or even administrators and parents who are supportive in theory of inclusion but do not know what it should look like in the classroom? This article is designed to be a primer for those individuals: to provide a glimpse into what should be occurring in an effective inclusive classroom. The following are what I look for

when observing "inclusive" classrooms.

Acceptance of diversity

Students with and without exceptionalities are welcome in the inclusive classroom. They should learn that the teacher will be "fair" to each of them by giving them what they need, not just what everyone else has. Peterson and Hittie (2003) recommend that teachers design and adapt instruction for diverse learners across three domains: academic, social-emotional and physical. For example, if a child has a learning disability, he may need extra time for processing a test. A student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may need direct instruction in socialization skills that her peers may not.

Because the inclusive classroom varies from room to room, based on the individual learners and needs in each class, the teacher needs to be a reflective practitioner.

A child with a broken arm may require help in writing. Regardless of the need, teachers who accept diversity should model that acceptance and tolerance to their students.

Willingness to address individual needs

"In differentiated classrooms, teachers provide specific ways for each individual to learn as deeply as possible, without assuming one student's road map for learning is identical to anyone else's. These teachers believe that students should be held to high standards. They work diligently to ensure that struggling, advanced, and in-between students think and work harder than they meant to; achieve more than they thought

they could; and come to believe that learning involves effort, risk, and personal triumph. These teachers also work to ensure that each student consistently experiences the reality that success is likely to follow hard work." (Tomlinson, 1999, p.2)

One of the most important aspects of differentiated instruction is that each child is working to his or her greatest potential, regardless of what other students in the class are doing. Each student is able to work towards mastery of the content standards, but accommodations and modifications are used as needed during that time. Teachers consider students' learning styles, sensory abilities, and multiple intelligences. They use tiered instruction, curriculum overlapping, universally designed instructional materials, multilevel teaching and individually designed adaptations.

The use of reflective practice

Because the inclusive classroom varies from room to room, based on the individual learners and needs in each class, the teacher needs to be a reflective practitioner. This means that he or she is able to be flexible based on the needs of the day, recognizing that these may change daily based on the individual student and what is going on that particular day. For example, a structure that typically works well for a student with autism may be thrown for a loop with an unannounced fire drill. The teacher would need to be able to reflect on what she knows about that child's needs in order to respond quickly and provide that child with the accommodation he may need (e.g., headphones to muffle the sound, an assistant or peer helper to escort him out of the room to the correct location outside). Recognizing that children's needs may change regularly, but that structure and consistency are key to a well-run classroom; the reflective educator in an inclusive classroom is able to provide structure with flexibility.

Encouragement of collaboration

Collaboration is key to effective inclu-

sion. General education teachers responsible for an inclusive classroom will find themselves needing to work with a multitude of individuals (e.g., administrators; parents; school psychologists; occupational, physical and speech therapists, and so forth). Parents can provide a wealth of information about individual children. When working with families, teachers need to be mindful of the variability in backgrounds, family structures, and frame of reference (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000), making sure not to stereotype, judge, or discriminate.

Many inclusive classrooms will have a classroom assistant, or paraprofessional, assigned to the class. This will happen more frequently if there are students with significant disabilities in the classroom. In the ideal inclusive classroom, these paraprofessionals would be able to help the entire class and not stigmatize the child with the disability by hovering over them at all times. Optimally, by using more natural support, other students would also be taught how to assist the student with special needs. The paraprofessional and classroom teacher would work together to ensure all students are able to participate fully.

Co-teaching is "when two or more educators co-plan, co-instruct, and co-assess a group of students with diverse needs in the same general education classroom" (Murawski, 2005, p.10). In this situation, a general and special education teacher would work collaboratively in the same classroom to meet the needs of all students. The general educator would frequently bring the content expertise, while the special educator would share expertise on modifications, adaptations and accommodations. Murawski and Dieker (2004) caution teachers to get to know one another first, to recognize one another's strengths and weaknesses, and to be prepared to use multiple approaches to instruction, rather than relying on the special educator as a glorified assistant in the class.

Summary

Students with ASD may increasingly find themselves in a general education classroom. The school environment can often "make a variety of structural, academic, and social demands, many of which are not well defined. Students with Asperger Syndrome [and other forms of autism] have difficulty coping with each of these demands individually; when they are combined, school can become a confusing, frustrating, and sometimes frightening place" (Myles & Simpson, 2003, p.55). While these individuals may exhibit a variety of needs in the cognitive, social and behavioral domains, an effective inclusive classroom can meet these needs. Teachers, parents, and other individuals who are trying to identify the characteristics of a classroom ideal for including all children, as well as those with ASD, should look for a class accepting of diversity, a curriculum that is individualized, a teacher who engages in reflective practice, and an environment that is collaborative in nature. When these are present, inclusion is truly at its best!

Identifying effective inclusive practices is important. Creating them is crucial. In the next issue of TAP, I will address how universities should be preparing teachers to teach in today's inclusive classrooms. **TAP**

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