

## THOUGHTS ON INCLUSION AND THE WORK WE DO WITH THE RIVENDELL SCHOOL

I've learned a thing or two since I started practicing inclusion many years ago. Perhaps most important, I've learned that inclusion really does benefit all children and families. Practicing inclusion can only improve a school environment and support the growth of the teachers who work in it. I've learned this working with children and their families. I've learned it through my work with teachers. And I've learned it through our collaboration with the Rivendell School. Inclusion does not mean accepting children who are different into your program, recognizing that they are different and leaving them alone with a Special Education Itinerant Teacher (SEIT) outside the culture of the classroom. In order for inclusion to work, the learning, the changing and the growing has to be shared. In order for inclusion to work, adults cannot look at the child with special needs as "other" but must see that child on the same continuum of development as all children.

When I started teaching in the late seventies, I hadn't ever given a thought to children with special needs and I certainly had no notion of what inclusion might mean.

Nevertheless, looking back, I know that I worked with a wide range of children and, without labeling what I was doing, I struggled as most teachers do to find ways to meet each child's needs, to find a way to make my classroom a place where each child could belong. I know that I believed there were special schools to meet the needs of "special" children. Segregation in programs that were separate but equal was something that I accepted without further thought. When mainstreaming and then inclusion became the trend, it wasn't the children that I feared, it was the SEIT. I did not see him or her as a potential partner, but as a threat to my autonomy within my classroom. Parents of typically developing children do often fear inclusion. They are concerned that developmental delays may somehow be contagious.

They worry that an inclusive program will be less challenging. They worry that special needs is a code for aggression. They worry that all the teachers' energy will go to these different children.

Parents of special needs children are also afraid. They worry that their children will be teased, that they won't get enough attention or be taught the necessary skills. They worry that their children will never fit in. As for the children themselves, although they tend to be the most readily accepting, it is also true that their feelings are the least often articulated and so may be the most difficult to read. I think they are often afraid too.

Nursery school is about building relationships. It is not about learning a body of information or a cluster of skills. It is about self-discovery and it is about friendship. It is even about teasing. It is about being teased and learning to tease and not needing to tease anymore. It is about tolerance and acceptance. It is about learning to take initiative and knowing when to follow. It is about shared experience and common goals. It is about industry and mastery. It is about cruelty and kindness, about identification and individuation, self-knowledge and building relationships. And we must all participate in this learning, children, teachers and parents alike.

One time, years ago, a complicated child in our oldest group, a child who seemed to fear relationships with other children as much he craved them, a child who would tease relentlessly and with a keen sense of the vulnerabilities of others, stopped himself before he made fun of the anxious noise another child was making. Instead he explained to himself out loud that what she was doing was very much like what he did in moments of anxiety. He recognized himself without the prompting of an adult sermon and he did not tease. No doubt he will tease again another day. But maybe he is a little less afraid. I have learned that collaboration is a complicated challenge to take on. But I have also learned that when special education and general

education teachers share a classroom, when parents of children with special needs and parents of typically developing children share a school, and when special needs and typically developing children share a world, we may all discover there is not so much to be afraid of.

Kate

|| In any early childhood classroom, there are children with a range of abilities, temperaments, and behaviors. Most teachers start the year by observing the particular strengths and needs of individual children. We notice who might need extra support during separation, who will do best sitting near a teacher at Meeting, or who might have a hard time getting up the stairs to the roof.

It is always at this time of year that I am thankful to have worked for so many years in inclusive classrooms and to have collaborated with so many Rivendell special education teachers and related service providers. My work with children with special needs has helped me develop resources for supporting a wide range of children. For example, watching a special education teacher create visual aids for a child with language delays helped inform my work supporting children who speak English as a second language, children who are strong visual rather than verbal learners, and toddlers whose language is not yet fully developed. My collaboration with an occupational therapist working with a highly impulsive child in my classroom has helped me build resources for handling impulsivity in general. Floor Time techniques that I learned in building relationships with children on the autistic spectrum have also been useful in drawing out shy or withdrawn children, particularly at the start of the school year.

Some schools do admissions via an elaborate selections process; they are looking for a child that is the right

'match' for the school. Some teachers may believe that this homogeneity makes their jobs easier. I believe that the opposite is true. Even teachers in schools with highly selective admissions screening will sometimes encounter a challenging child or group of children. However, when a teacher becomes used to working with a very narrow range of children, she does not always have a chance to develop resources for coping with situations that fall outside of that range. Then, when faced with a child whose behavior or abilities or learning style is unlike those of his classmates, the teacher may feel at a loss.

Because I have always worked with a range of children and with the support of special educators from Rivendell, I feel confident that I can find ways of adapting the environment and my own practice to meet a diversity of needs. The challenge, however, becomes, how to make these adaptations while maintaining my classroom's culture and adhering to my own teaching philosophy. I have to start the year knowing which aspects of the classroom environment and curriculum I want to stay unchanged, and which ones are open to adaptation to meet the needs of this year's group. I have to know which rules for classroom life are flexible and which are not.

It can be a real balancing act to manage the needs of the group and the needs of individual children while also staying true to my own beliefs about what quality early childhood education looks like. But performing that balancing act each year, with the support and input of colleagues, has made me a more well-rounded teacher. It makes the start of each year and the prospect of an unknown group of new children exciting, rather than daunting. Meeting and working with all kinds of children is what I love most about my job, and I am happy to work in an environment that seeks out and welcomes that diversity, with all of its challenges and rewards.

Meredith

*written in 2005 during my first year as a teacher at Pace Little School*