[INCLUSIVE] schooling

9 Practices to Make Any Lesson Inclusive

By Julie Causton and Kate MacLeod

When creating inclusive schools, inclusive instruction becomes even more critical for the success of all students. Below are 9 practices to help educators create and commit to effective inclusive instruction at any grade level.

What are some inclusive practices that work?

1. **Presume Competence.** Teacher perception is critical for student success, so we must approach all students with the belief that they are capable, and proceed as if they will be able to learn grade level content. If we lower expectations for students, even those with the most significant support needs, we too often make assumptions that are incorrect and detrimentally impact students. To presume competence means to give students the benefit of the doubt and then look hard for the evidence.

2. **Keep Expectations High.** Once we set the foundation of presuming competence, we must then aim to keep expectations high. It is important to remember that students with disabilities can master content and complete assignments and projects in the same way as a non-disabled student. Before attempting to modify or alter a student's assignment, determine whether the assignment actually needs any changes for that student. Too often, education professionals overmodify for students or decide to make the same modification for every student with the same disability. Instead, the best thing to do for a student is to maintain high expectations, and simply change the type or level of support. For example, if 6th grader Rosie is two grade levels behind in math, rather than over modifying her work by giving her 4th grade math problems, provide her with models for the 6th grade problems, provide her with the opportunity to check her work with a peer and/or a calculator. Again and again we find that when we set high expectations and provide appropriate supports, students like Rosie make greater gains

3. **Start with Student Strengths.** This practice improves instruction and access for all students and is incredibly helpful when planning for a student with complex support needs whose deficits can make the task of creating accessible lessons seem difficult or even overwhelming. For example, when supporting Jacob, a student with Autism who does not read on grade level and does not communicate verbally, educators might be concerned and ask— how will he read this text and respond to questions during discussion? But the task of creating access and support becomes much easier when we start with his strengths instead of his deficits. In Jacob's example, we know his strengths related to this assignment are that he types to communicate and is able to listen to grade level text and understand it. Knowing this, we now have the important information needed to best support Jacob during this lesson. Starting with strengths not only

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helps the educator feel less overwhelmed, it is necessary in order to determine needed access points.

4. **Prioritize Skills** For some students we need to carefully select a subset of standards or essentialized learning outcomes. This is called content prioritization. For some students, learning all of the content might not be possible. You may make decisions to prioritize because of readiness, to bring students to the next level of learning, or you might select content that is more generalizable or functional. It is ok to prioritize content in order to be sure students learn the very most important or the big picture content. For example, educators for Damien, an 8th grade student with an intellectual disability, prioritized general education science content and skills for him by identifying 3 big ideas, 3 key skills, and 5-10 key vocabulary words from each unit. He was therefore mastering prioritized content from each unit, achieving great success based on his own needs and IEP, and included meaningfully in all assignments and work with peers.

5. **Universally Design Instruction.** When creating inclusive lessons it is best to limit activities that require students to complete learning in the same way. Instead, always plan to universally design instruction and differentiate to give all students, especially those who experience learning differences, with multiple ways to flexibly engage with learning and show what they know. *Universally designed lessons* are planned with student diversity, including strengths and needs, in mind. Students might work on similar standards or goals (e.g. retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson) but they can do so in different ways and using different entry points using differentiation. For example, educators can provide students with diverse stories based on interest and reading levels to increase access and motivation. Some students might listen to their story while others might read it silently. Options for retelling the story are also provided, with some students retelling verbally, others creating a Google Slides retelling with visuals to support, while others might create a drawn story map. Finally, some students might also need additional layers of support built in, for example, access to definitions of key vocabulary words from the story, main points highlighted, or the story provided in their native language. Providing universally designed instruction not only benefits all students it shows students that educators value diversity.

6. **Scaffold.** Breaking your universally designed learning into chunks is an important instructional practice to support all students. And for each small chunk of the learning, it is important to provide students with a supportive tool or structure. These scaffolded chunks and tools and structures can take many forms, such as pre-teaching vocabulary, utilizing student prior knowledge and interests, using visual supports like graphic organizers, images, or objects, and providing structure and time for feedback from peers and educators. For example, if a class is expected to read a text and write a persuasive argument about the text, scaffolding can include reviewing how to find the main idea in the text, using a graphic organizer to help students chunk the process of identifying a
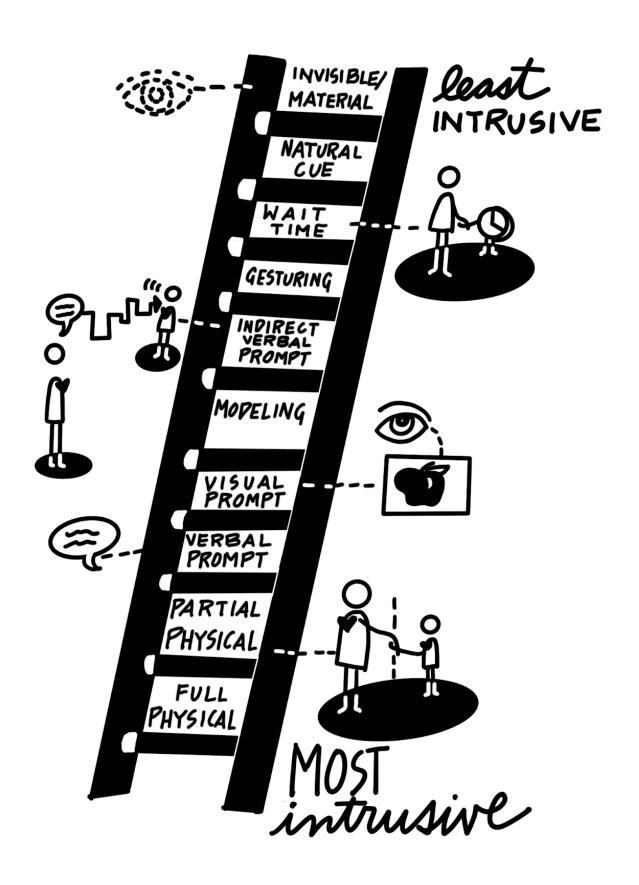
central persuasive argument and providing support for that argument, and later providing a structured peer review process for students to support each other in reviewing their work. Some students may need heavier levels of accommodations and modifications in their scaffolded supports, and all students will benefit from the use of universal design to increase options and interest areas, but ultimately providing all students with scaffolds increases access for everyone.

7. **Prioritize Collaboration.** Creating collaborative experiences is one of the best ways to create inclusive lessons and provide effective support for all students. When students come to expect that they must work in teams or partnerships and they learn from teachers that it is their job to help each other, inclusive support and empathy becomes the norm. Have students support each other in multiple ways such as with organization, as learning partners or teams (make sure they each have specific roles and clear outcomes for their roles), as scribes or translators, and even as supporting adaptations or communication. The research on peer relationships and support is crystal clear: it improves the academic, behavioral, and social experiences of students with and without disabilities. However, some caution is necessary regarding collaboration and peer support. Avoid creating only "helping relationships" for the student with a disability. For example, Sonja always helps Jose, who has a disability, with reading, organization, and spelling. Instead, facilitate and encourage students to help each other. Figure out times when Jose can help Sonja and others in the classroom to allow for more equal relationships to form.

8. **Fade Support.** Providing students with supports and services gives them the opportunity for greater access to general education content, settings, and peers. However, it is also important that educators understand how to evaluate those supports and services and determine a timeline and plan for whether and how to fade those supports so that the student can complete the skill or task more independently. For example, if a student, Cameron, is learning to eye-point in order to communicate, his educators might use frequent verbal and gestural prompts to teach him how to eye- point using a particular communication application on an iPad. The educators might then plan to fade adult-only prompting by teaching Cameron's peers to use the same prompts, which will increase peer interaction and interdependence for Jonah. Then the team would monitor Cameron's progress with eye-pointing and create a plan to fade his peers' use of verbal and gestural prompts too. Ultimately, the goal is that Cameron uses eye-pointing to communicate without prompting supports from peers or adults.

   Below, we've included a fading prompts ladder and step by step discussion teams can have to meaningfully fade supports adapted from Causton and MacLeod's new book *The Paraprofessional's Handbook to Inclusive Practices* (2020).

INVISIBLE/ MATERIAL

NATURAL CUE

WAIT TIME

GESTURING

INDIRECT VERBAL PROMPT

MODELING

VISUAL PROMPT

VERBAL PROMPT

PARTIAL PHYSICAL

FULL PHYSICAL

least INTRUSIVE

MOST intrusive

- During what activities, routines, or time periods is it absolutely necessary to provide support for this student?
- How often (and during what activities) is the student provided with opportunities for choice in supports?
- During those times in which support is needed, is it possible to fade to independence (done by the student) or interdependence (done with the support of a peer?)
- What natural supports exist in this environment (e.g. peers, teacher, or materials)? Can the student rely on environmental and natural supports?
- What changes to classroom structures, schedules or content might help this student become more independent or interdependent?
- How often (and during what activities) is the student expected to and provided opportunities to self-advocate (e.g. I need support for...) regarding supports?

9. **WITH not just IN.** When planning inclusive lessons, students with disabilities need to be much more than just physically present — they need to be meaningfully involved and valued. Using the above 8 practices are excellent ways to achieve meaningful and active involvement for students with disabilities. We also encourage educators to use community building activities throughout the instructional day to consistently communicate that diversity and connection is valued within the class. For example, educators might start out each class with a 5 minute meeting or a check in so that all students can share their feelings or important life events with each other. Educators might build organized community building activities into instruction so students learn about each other in specific ways and can use that knowledge to improve classroom activities and better understand how diversity of each student increases the overall value of the class as a whole. Celebrating and highlighting diversity is paramount to the success of inclusive instruction, schools, and communities.