Making Inclusion a Reality in ELA Classrooms:
Four Practical Ideas

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Roughly 63% of students with /dis/abilies spend a majority of their school day in the general education classroom (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) engaging in a practice known as inclusion. These students may be included for any and all subjects, including English Language Arts (ELA). Therefore, it is likely that the majority of ELA teachers have taught, or will be teaching, students with and without /dis/abilities inclusively in one classroom. Inclusion as a philosophy and practice formally entered the educational landscape in the 1970s and 1980s (Osgood, 2005; Teacher Education Division, Council for Exceptional Children, 1987). With nearly 50 years of discussion, legislation, and implementation, it may be tempting to think that the challenges associated with inclusion have been remedied. However, the *how-to* of inclusion is still very much a work-in-progress.

Research suggests that both general education and special education teachers charged with educating students with /dis/abilities feel unprepared (Kloo & Zigmond, 2008; Rea & Connell, 2005) and lacking in the skills they need (Grant & Gillette, 2006; Little & Theiker, 2009) to effectively implement inclusive practices. In addition, there is no universally agreed upon and understood definition for *what* inclusion is or *how* to do it, though most inclusive classrooms are built on time, energy, and effort from both a general and a special educator. Inclusive schools also utilize the expertise of additional adults, such as reading interventionists and paraprofessionals, working collaboratively to serve all students.

Understanding what inclusion *is* and *how to* put it into action effectively is especially important for ELA educators, as it is often in literacy-heavy classrooms where the true scope and diversity of student learning needs come to light. According to the 2017

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), as many as 32% of 4th graders, 24% of 8th graders, and 28% of 12th graders performed at *below basic* in reading, with another significant percentage reading at *basic* (31% , 40%, and 35% respectively). This national data on reading performance suggests that both students *with* and *without* /dis/abilities would benefit from having two (or more) certified educators working together to use a range of inclusive and evidenced-based practices. This would likely maximize and diversify the types and amounts of learning opportunities and strategies available for *all* students.

The purpose of this article is to outline key ideas and specific strategies that ELA educators can implement across PK-12 to improve their *inclusive* practices and effectively serve *all* learners.

Key Idea 1: Inclusion Does NOT Equal Co-Teaching

Often, educators and school administrators use the term *inclusion* interchangeably with *co-teaching*. Therefore, when special education or ELA educators hear that they will be working in an inclusive model, they often assume they will be co-teaching. While both practices typically involve both special education and ELA educators, *inclusion* and *co-teaching* are actually distinctive concepts that require different systems and supports in order to be implemented successfully.

Inclusion as a *philosophy* holds that *all* learners--those with and without /dis/abilities, English learners, students experiencing poverty or trauma--are fully valued and included meaningfully in all school environments. To do this, *all* adults work collaboratively, inside and out of classroom spaces (Lipsky & Gartner, 2008).

Inclusion as a *practice* refers to two qualified educators, most often in special education and general education, with their own training, specializations, strengths, areas of expertise, and experiences, collaborating to develop and implement specially designed instruction that meets the needs of all students, including those with special education needs. The goal is for both educators to share intentionally the responsibility of teaching

and learning for *all* students across environments. While inclusion as a practice can, and arguably should, include models of co-teaching, co-teaching is just one of many tools from which effective inclusive models can draw. Inclusive education is bigger than co-teaching. It includes a wide range of practices, including Universal Design for Learning, augmentative and alternative communication, and assistive technology, each of which is explored in-depth below.

Unfortunately, when schools and classrooms are structured with a *philosophy of inclusion* without sufficient attention to the technical and logistical needs of the *practices of inclusion*, there is a mismatch in expectations and reality. This is especially true when *co-teaching* is the expectation, but has not been planned for sufficiently. The schedules, systems, teaching practices, and supports required for each are markedly different. Imagine heading into a couple's ice skating competition only to find that the competition is designed for single skaters. While there is significant overlap between the two skating populations, they are distinctive, and the couple will not be successful when judged based on singles expectations. In the case of co-teaching in an inclusive school, this can lead to frustration and disillusionment for both the ELA and special education educators alike (Toson & Weisling, 2020).

What can I do? The most important thing any inclusive educator can do is to talk candidly with both the building administration and the peer(s) with whom they will be enacting inclusion. Be clear about the expectations for supporting students with /dis/abilities in the classroom. Build relationships with and challenge common misconceptions about "my" and "your" students and classroom.

Key Idea 2: Space Matters
Walk into the majority of schools and you will see that special education and general education (including ELA) are siloed. If not, special education tends to "roam" in and out of *other* (mostly general education) *teachers'* classrooms. The status quo is that it is the general educator's room, desk, name on the door, name on the letters home to families, name in the record books, and presence at conference time.

Too often teachers' roles in shared classrooms are similarly divided. In the case of inclusive ELA classrooms, it is the ELA educators who lead instruction, confer with "their" students during independent reading, and facilitate and evaluate whole group discussion. Special educators are relegated to the role of assistant when in the room or, conversely, opt to pull "their" students out for small group or 1:1 teaching (Toson & Weisling, 2020). This separation of space and roles communicates a clear message to both educators, their students, and to families: the general educator is *the* teacher, the special educator is the support. These silos also represent missed opportunities for students.

The reality is, both educators come to their roles with unique, specialized, and valuable skills. In the case of ELA educators, especially those who exclusively teach ELA courses, their pre-service training likely focused on content and pedagogy *specific to* ELA, giving them expertise in designing and implementing lessons specific to reading and writing. This is markedly different from the training most special educators receive, which tends toward understanding learner diversity and how to differentiate and adjust pedagogical decisions to meet individual student needs. Giving educators the opportunity to combine their expertise through inclusive teaching can enhance the learning experience of students with and without /dis/abilities.

What can I do? Schools, administrators, and teachers must collectively, intentionally, and actively shift away from siloing both the physical designation of "ELA educators" and "special education" classroom or office, and the delegation of roles and responsibilities from ELA educators as lead, and special educator as support. Instead, classroom spaces and responsibilities should be shared equitably and responsively based on teachers' expertise and students' needs.

For example, instead of viewing special educators as teachers who *go in* to the ELA educator's classroom or work in *their own* space, both ELA educators and special educators must be seen as equally qualified, specialist educators, as demonstrated by sharing the physical space and the roles and responsibilities of the classroom.

ELA educators can help by:

- Insisting that both names go on both the door and on all communications home;
- Always saying "us"/ "we"/ "our" (if even the special educator isn't in the room);
- Creating a shared professional space (e.g., desks together, spaces for personal belongings) for both educators;
- Soliciting advice and ideas from the special educator, particularly around Universal Design for Learning, differentiation, and academic and behavioral scaffolds;
- Sharing in the planning (or at least the plans);
- Taking the initiative to organize the time and structures for planning and implementation of procedures, behavioral expectations, and lessons to include the special educator(s) as active participants and equals;
- Co-selecting time for the special educators to lead instruction based on their expertise and student needs, including read alouds, shared reading, discussions, and centers.

Special educators can help by:

- "Owning" their role as *equal* educator, even though their daily role may look very different, and they may feel uncomfortable or even unqualified to do so (Toson & Weisling, 2020);
- Offering ideas and suggestions, and being willing to take the lead on planning, instructing, and/or assessing (again, even if they feel uncomfortable/unqualified to do so);
- Assessing and evaluating student assessments and work samples to shed light on possible reading-related challenges;
- Supporting and/or leading efforts for differentiation and designing lessons using UDL (see *Key Idea 4*);
- Challenging their own internal beliefs and use of "my students" language.

Key Idea 3: Try Out Models of Co-Teaching

Teaching students to be readers, researchers, writers, presenters and thinkers is complex and requires that both ELA educators and special educators have an extensive knowledge base and robust range of pedagogical tools. Learning to read and write are similarly complex processes, and the ways in which students can struggle to learn or demonstrate their learning are as variable as the students themselves. When ELA educators and special educators come together to share and build upon one another's expertise by designing, implementing, and assessing ELA instruction, the potential benefits to students are immense and varied across academic, behavioral/social, and professional domains (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Cole et al., 2019; Conderman et al., 2013; DeSimone et al., 2013). Co-teaching, as mentioned above, is one potential model of inclusive teaching.

Co-teaching happens when two (or more) professionals jointly plan and deliver substantive and specially designed instruction to a diverse, blended group of students in a single physical space with parity, or equal status (Friend & Pope, 2005; Murawski & Dieker, 2004; Spencer, 2005). It is highly recommended that this includes co-planning; co-facilitating instruction in flexible models; and sharing responsibility for materials preparation, assessment, and subsequent planning. While co-teaching most often refers to special and general educators, it can refer to any partnerships of adults (e.g., reading interventionists, two general education, paraprofessionals) who work collaboratively to serve all students.

At the core, co-teaching requires shared time, space, sense of accountability, and ownership in order to fully leverage the presence of two qualified adults to effectively guide students learning. Carving out that time, space, and sense of collaboration with parity can be challenging for a range of reasons.

For example, special educators' daily responsibilities are dictated by the goals and supplementary aides and services outlined in students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). With diverse roles and expectations, inclusion may be *one of several* responsibilities they have in a given day, or it may be the *only* one. It is possible that students' IEPs will require special educators to divide time between multiple learning

spaces. Even if all services are to be delivered in the general education classroom, with caseloads ranging from 5 to more than 25 students, it is not uncommon for special educators to work across multiple general education classrooms, content areas, and/or grades. These challenges are further compounded when school-wide systems and structures such as master scheduling, strategic co-teacher partnering, and expectations for co-teaching are unclear or unsupported, making shared planning time nearly impossible.

In addition to logistical challenges, co-teaching is commonly compared to a marriage, and for good reason: it requires trust, relationship, and time! Bringing two individuals together, with distinctive ideas about what a well-run and engaging classroom looks like, is hard work! Personality clashes and different preferences, beliefs, and practices, coupled with a lack of time to genuinely collaborate and build relationships, create barriers to effective co-teaching and inclusion. Compounding this, most special educators are not "monogamous" with a singular ELA partner. Instead, they typically have multiple classrooms in which they are responsible for offering specialized support.

Despite these challenges, and in addition to benefits described above, co-teaching allows teachers to share the workload, utilizes educators' different expertises, reduces the student-to-adult ratio, and differentiates the instructional models and pedagogical tools.

What Can I Do? The most important thing educators can do is *try!* Given the challenges described above, particularly school-level scheduling and special educators' other responsibilities, this may require intentional commitment and effort from both parties and an agreed-upon flexibility and grace between both individuals.

Five commonly used and recommended models (Friend & Cook, 2016) and how they might look in an ELA classroom are described in detail below. Wherever classroom-based examples are provided, the roles of special educators and ELA educators can and should be used interchangeably.

1. <u>One lead/one support</u>. In this model, one person takes lead on instruction while the other supports with managing materials, maintaining a positive learning climate, trouble-shooting (e.g., if technology is being used), collecting targeted data, and generally being available to step in as needed. Either educator can and should step into either role! The pair may even choose to alternate throughout the lesson.

    In an ELA classroom:
    - the special educator leads a lesson on locating evidence in the text to support a claim while the ELA educator circulates to monitor students' practice attempts, taking note of who is on track to master the objective and who might benefit from remediation in a small group during independent reading;
    - the ELA educator periodically interjects a quick clarifying question or example during a special education-led lesson;
    - the ELA educator leads a small group discussion of a complex text, while the special educator supports students' behavior as they try newly taught social skills.

2. <u>Team teaching</u> is a co-teaching model during which both teachers are equally responsible for planning and instructing all students. Both teachers are at the front of or circulating around the room taking turns leading instruction, discussing key concepts, modeling, using question-and-answer with one another to illustrate main ideas, managing materials, and supporting students' academic and behavioral needs.

    In an ELA classroom:
    - each instructor takes turns reading different characters in a story, poem, or script;
    - one educator reads a story while the other pauses to get metacognitive and model their thinking;
    - both educators model appropriate language stems for debating a topic; and
    - much, much more

    While all models have seemingly endless applications, team teaching is perhaps the most fun, versatile, impactful, and relationship-intensive model of co-teaching.

3. <u>Parallel teaching</u> takes place when both teachers divide the class equally and teach the same lesson content simultaneously, though the instructional methods and/or materials used by each may differ. This division of labor can reduce the workload for each teacher and increase the amount and type of support and attention available for students by lowering the student-to-adult ratio.

   Nearly any content in an ELA classroom is conducive to parallel teaching, which requires some shared planning of the lessons' broad strokes, but it also has built-in flexibility for both educators to work independently on their own version of the lesson.

   In an ELA classroom, each instructor:
   - covers the same learning objective, such as grounding conclusions in evidence from the text, but through different text levels or formats (e.g., text vs. audio);
   - reduces the teacher-to-student ratio on a particularly nuanced learning goal such as analyzing a Civil War primary source, in which language usage and vocabulary may be unfamiliar;
   - divides the class into different application activity groups. For example, the special educator may lead a Reader's Theatre group of students who need additional fluency support while the general education teacher leads a group working on comprehension through an arts-integrated diorama project

4. <u>Alternative teaching</u>. At this time, two or more educators divide the class into different-sized groups. One group is taught the lesson of the day and the other is provided an alternate lesson, often remediation or enrichment. Like all models of co-teaching, adults should divide responsibility for the groups based on their expertise as well as their students' specific needs. The benefits of alternative teaching are similar to parallel teaching.

In an ELA classroom, alternative teaching may be necessary for various reasons:

- At the end of a lesson, 80% of students scored lower than 50% on the exit slip, while 20% did not miss any questions. Together, both instructors together may determine that, in the next lesson, the special educator should re-teach the lesson to the 80% who struggled while the ELA educator pulls the other 20% for enrichment;

- While team teaching a lesson on how particular lines of dialogue in a play propel the action by using close reading, the general educator and special educator analyze student work samples and find that 10 of 24 students are struggling. They decide to divide the class during independent work, with the ELA educator re-teaching content to the 10 students who struggled while the special educator works with the remaining 14 for enrichment;

- After analyzing first drafts of essays, the instructors find that one sub-group of students needs targeted support to organize main ideas around a thesis, while the rest of the class is ready to continue with the follow-up lesson on expanding and extending their arguments. They decide that one educator will teach the planned lesson, while the other delivers an alternate lesson on how to develop and organize a thesis paper to a small group.

5. <u>Centers/stations teaching</u> takes place when both teachers lead the planning and implementation of different learning stations connected to the same content. Students rotate through each station, working with both educators.

In an ELA classroom:
- one teacher leads guided reading groups, another facilitates word study, and a third (or more) facilitates an independent center for students to rotate through;

- one teacher leads core reading groups, a reading interventionist delivers tier 2 or tier 3 interventions, one educator or paraprofessional delivers specially designed instruction, and at least one other facilitates independent centers.

There are seemingly endless ways each model of co-teaching can be used. To help both educators get started with co-teaching, it can be helpful to:

- Pick **one** model to try out. Plan to use it regularly (2-3 times per week) for a month;
- Invest time to clarify roles and responsibilities, given the choice of model;
- Shake up the roles played by each educator: perhaps some days the special educator leads and the ELA educator supports, and perhaps some days the special educator takes the group working on the daily lesson while the ELA educator works with the remediation group;
- Use students' needs and adults' expertise to guide decision-making;
- Add another model--and use multiple models within a singular lesson--when ready!

Additional information and examples of models of co-teaching can be found through the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education.

Key Idea 4: Use Universal Design

Among the many strategies that either ELA or special educators can use to effectively support all learners are Universal Design for Learning, Assistive Technology, and Augmentative and Alternative Communication. When ELA and special educators use these practices, they:

select and use augmentative and alternative communication devices and assistive and instructional technology products to promote student learning and independence … [and] use the universal design for learning framework to select, design, implement, and evaluate important student outcomes." (McLeskey et al., 2017, p. 22)

1. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for guiding teachers' decision-making related to instructional practice, materials, and curricula to meet the needs of all learners (Gorden, Meyer, & Rose, 2016). This flexibility is key given the variability of learners in our classrooms (Meyer et al., 2014). In fact, advances in neuroscience have shown that learners approach, engage with, and express learning in different ways, even those who appear to have similar characteristics and abilities (Hartmann, 2015).

   The UDL framework (Gorden, Meyer, & Rose, 2016) lays out the following three principles (further explored at CAST) providing students with multiple means of:
   a. representation: the "what" of learning, how new information is presented;
   b. action and expression: the "how" of learning, the ways in which students practice with and show their understanding of their learning;
   c. engagement: the "why" of learning, how teachers help students prioritize and make space for learning new content.

   While planning, ELA and special educators can combine their knowledge of students, content, and pedagogy to present information, let students practice and show mastery, and capture students' attention to the content in a variety of ways, responding to students' diverse needs. In ELA classrooms, some of the most common practices include audio text, peer reading, and dictating or providing oral responses (such as through role playing or acting). A wonderful, self-guided resource that teachers can access to learn more about UDL comes from the IRIS Center at Vanderbilt University.

2. Assistive Technology (AT). According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), assistive technology is any "piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of a child with a disability." While originally conceptualized as a special education support, Assistive Technology is a scientifically sound and effective education tool that can enable ELA and special educators to serve *all* students.

Assistive Technology strategies can be low or high tech. In an ELA classroom, low tech can be as simple as putting Post-it Notes of key vocabulary words on a student's desk, or highlighting specific passages for a reader to focus on. Higher tech ELA practices include using an advanced e-reader, a digital note taking pen, or tablets with customizable screens for pictures, words, or passages. In today's digital world, the available options are limitless and can be quite cost effective. Additional information and examples can be found at the [IRIS Center](#).

3. Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing-Association (n.d.), AAC is "all of the ways that we share our ideas and feelings without talking." AAC includes three formats, each of which has specific applications to ELA classrooms: *unaided, basic,* and *high tech. Unaided* AAC involves only one's own body, such as for sign language, gestures and other non-verbal forms of communication; *basic* can include pointing to words on paper, in a text, or on a screen; and *high-tech* includes systems that require the use of a tool or device, such as speaking computers.

As an evidence-based practice, AAC has shown to have a positive effect on the social, language and communication capabilities for students with autism, intellectual disabilities and complex communication needs (Barbosa et al., 2018; Morin et al. 2018) and to reduce challenging behavior for students with disabilities within inclusive settings (Walker et al., 2018).

What Can I Do? Collaborate with your colleagues to implement a UDL framework with both AT and AAC at the onset of lesson planning and throughout the teaching and learning cycle. See Flanagan, Liebling, and Meltzer (2013) for a detailed example of applying UDL, AT and ACC.

Conclusion

Inclusion as a philosophy and as a practice is daunting, nuanced, and specialized work! Research demonstrates that inclusion can have many positive benefits for students with and without /dis/abilities, as well as for the educators who serve them. Students with /dis/abilities see more satisfying and diverse friendships and improved communication (Ballard & Dymond; 2017; DeSimone, Maldonado, & Rodriguez, 2013), better post-high school outcomes (Wagner et al., 2006) and, for students with /dis/abilities who spend their entire day in general education classrooms, "significantly better [outcomes] in both reading and math assessments than their peers … in separate special education classrooms" (Cole et al. 2019, p.2). For inclusive educators, engaging in the practice of inclusion is linked to higher rates of professional growth (Conderman et al., 2013). And for students without /dis/abilities, inclusion results in greater gains in mathematics and reading, reduced fear of differences, and increased empathy, self-concept, social cognition, and ethical principles (A.B. 1914, 2020).

While effective, many educators feel unprepared and ineffective, and it can be tempting to give up on inclusion (Toson & Weisling, 2020). However, inclusion, co-teaching, Universal Design for Learning, Assistive Technology, and Augmentative and Alternative Communication are all worthwhile endeavors that can ultimately lighten the load for educators, allowing them to learn from one another; reduce teacher-to-student ratios; provide students with diverse teaching styles and strategies; and result in a wide range of measurable, positive outcomes. While challenging, inclusion is not only very much worth doing, but also achievable in every ELA classroom.

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