



How can we share our learning differences discoveries and resources in order to benefit the children in our school?
Thoughts on Inclusiveness - by Angela Jurgensen

When special needs students started going to school back in the 70s, they had their own separate classrooms and programs. Teachers historically do not communicate with each other when the student completes the semester, and so no insight is given to the next teacher. This continued to be true after integration, but current times demand a change in the way we see a classroom. Education should be cooperative, involving not only the counsellor and special needs specialist available to the school, but also and most importantly the other teachers and the Education Assistants.

But how can we share resources, and not become overwhelmed by the process?

Having an IEP that can be worked from is a good start. These plans are supposed to have a compilation of useful information about the student. However, only a small percentage of children who need help are actually tested and thus qualify for IEPs; the waiting list is very long. Here's where a school-wide program such as RTI would work well. Also, while an IEP is a good start, there is very little, if any, about what works with the students, such as anecdotes and ideas for techniques gathered in the classroom. Every teacher has to start from square one, and participate in much trial and error, before they can find something that reaches the student. This lack of information and continuity becomes even more damaging to students as they reach their teenage years, and are naturally reluctant to share information with the teachers.

What if teachers had easier access to the information regarding students with special needs, and were able to add to, give insight and share information easily with other teachers? What if, every time a certain student's IEP was modified, every teacher currently teaching this student would be updated with a new technique or tool that was discovered? Instead of having the material set in stone, the IEP would change and evolve through-

out the year, becoming a much more useful tool for teachers everywhere. This idea of a more interactive IEP is already being tested; a solution is already happening in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, through a company called IEP direct. Their website, IEPdirect.com, claims that over 70% of schools in those districts are currently using the software, and are extremely pleased with its functionality and ability to help students in need. In reality, all students could benefit from this kind of tool, so there is good reasoning in having all students in a school be a part of the same system.

One thing that consistently was asked of me during the discussion time was, how about student confidentiality? Nowadays, it is so easy to make sure information remains confidential. The internet is already keeping our most important files and information confidential, on a daily basis. We bank online, we have our medical files online, and all of our college files are also available this way. In fact, right now in B.C., files for children on social services are kept online, and they are all only accessible by the people who are working on the child, for his or her benefit. If even social workers are already embracing this tool, there is no reason we as teachers can't start using something like this as well.

It could be something as simple as the D2L system, in which a teacher would log in to their account, and only the students they will have this semester would populate, just like only the classes we have during this semester populate. Every comment made would be traceable and assessable by everyone else, which would inspire hopefully a more positive attitude towards the student. This, plus a strong RTI system, would make for a school community that is ready and willing to nurture every student.

Regarding avoiding bias, in reality, teachers already talk about the students in the lunch room, and often when referring to someone with special needs, the conversation is not positive. Speech has the ability to make people not accountable for their opinions, because whatever we say verbally seems lost in the wind; what we don't realize is that the damage done by words is just as effective as the damage done in writing, and much easier to do.

If a school encourages teachers to refrain from expressing their opinions regarding a student over lunch, and instead encourages them to write helpful observations on the shared file online, the teachers will naturally think before they write their observations, and with a site focused on positives, they will feel compelled to share only what they believe would be helpful for the student to succeed in other classes.

It would require, of course, a change in the culture of the school, and individuals willing to embrace a new paradigm when dealing with students: that all students are deserving of equal treatment and chances, even if they were not created equal.

The future of the children in our schools should not belong to any one individual. It should be fostered by a collaborative group of people, including teachers and counselors, aiming for the best growth and development practices possible in order to give all students the support they need.

I really enjoyed researching this topic, as I believe in sharing resources between teachers. I read so many interesting ideas, it was hard to focus and streamline the presentation. When I get a job in a school, I would like to suggest a way for everyone to share things such as lesson plans, PowerPoints and the like, so that we wouldn't have to always create something from zero. If every teacher gets the lesson plan or PowerPoint and improves upon it, and then shares it on a data bank, and then adds more resources such as videos, games and the like, then we have an approach to the curriculum which is always growing and rich in diversity.

When it comes to sharing information regarding students, both with special needs and with regular learning, I find it becomes even more crucial to have an easy, open stream of communication between all teachers involved with the student. Given the reality we live in today, I find the idea of sharing information online under a secure, private server, 100% viable. Most people immediately were reticent regarding this, and I understand their fears, but other government agencies dealing with children welfare already use online access to share information. As long as it is properly passworded, there is no reason for concern. I appreciated the opportunity to present this topic to my peers; it really helped clarify and consolidate some of my ideas and think of addressing common misconceptions. I will, in the future, work towards getting a similar system implemented in B.C. schools, as I feel it would be a huge benefit for everyone involved.

