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MAXIMIZING LEARNING FOR ALL STUDENTS

INCLUSION PRACTICES FOR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMS



I first learned that an incoming Pre-K student named Lucie had Down syndrome. I felt a familiar mix of anticipation and determination. I also felt a bit of fear or even intimidation, for I possess both a Bachelor's and Master's, both of which are in Elementary Education, but not Special Education.Teaching in a Catholic school, I knew my mission extended beyond standard lesson plans; it was rooted in the belief that every child is created in the image and likeness of God.

What I did not fully realize at the time was how profoundly Lucie's presence would transform my classroom environment. Years later, when fate aligned and I was assigned to teach Lucie again in fourth grade, I witnessed a beautiful, full-circle evolution of an inclusive community that showered benefits on every single student in the room.

Planting the Seeds of Empathy in Pre-K

In Pre-K, the curriculum centers around foundational social dynamics: sharing, recognizing emotions, and building a community. For four-year-olds, differences are not yet standard categories for judgment; they are simply variations of the world around them.

Lucie's presence naturally cultivated a culture of organic empathy among her peers. When Lucie struggled with speech or fine motor skills, I didn't need to step in constantly. Instead, her classmates instinctively stepped up. They learned to interpret her gestures, patiently wait for her to respond, and celebrate her victories—like successfully zipping her jacket—with the same enthusiasm as winning a game.

For these young minds, compassion became a muscle they exercised daily. They grew to understand that everyone learns and moves at their own pace, a lesson that fundamentally reshaped their understanding of kindness from a very young age.

Nurturing Leadership and Faith in Fourth Grade

Fast forward five years. I transitioned to teaching fourth grade, and as the class rosters were distributed, I smiled when I saw I had Lucie once more.



By fourth grade, academic and social pressures normally begin to intensify. Cliques can form, and academic competition often mounts. However, entering my fourth-grade classroom felt like stepping into an established sanctuary. The children who had shared a rug with Lucie in Pre-K were now older, more mature, and fiercely protective of their lifelong friend. The benefits to the neurotypical students in fourth grade shifted from basic empathy to genuine leadership and moral clarity.

Peer-Led Mentorship:
During reading blocks or group science activities, students seemed to enjoy working with Lucie. They learned how to break down complex instructions into manageable steps, inadvertently strengthening their own comprehension and communication skills.

The Antidote to Perfectionism:
In an age where children increasingly suffer from anxiety over performance and grades, Lucie brought a grounding joy to the classroom. Her classmates saw her work twice as hard to master a concept, bringing a healthy perspective to their own academic frustrations.

Living the Gospel Message:
In a Catholic school setting, religious education is a daily focus. Having Lucie in my class turned abstract theology into a tangible reality. When I taught lessons on the inherent dignity of the human person or the Body of Christ, she didn't have to look far for a real-world example. The students were actively living out Catholic social teaching by embracing Lucie as an equal, vital member of their community.

A Two-Way Street of GRACE

It is easy to focus on how an inclusive classroom benefits the student with special needs.Lucie undoubtedly thrived; her speech expanded, her reading comprehension and her math skills increased, and more importantly, her social confidence was robust.

But the true revelation of my career was seeing how much more the classroom received than it gave. By integrating a child with Down syndrome into the fabric of daily school life, these children did not just learn about charity from a textbook—they practiced it at recess, during math, and in the lunch line.

I feel that my Pre-K and fourth-grade classes graduated into higher grades not just as stronger academic students, but as deeply compassionate leaders, equipped with an enduring understanding that every person possesses an irreplaceable gift to offer the world.

This article was written by Theresa Boorse M.Ed., Fourth Grade teacher at Nativity of Our Lord Elementary School, Warminster, PA. Each edition of **Maximizing Learning for All Students** explores inclusion practices that minimize barriers and maximize learning for ALL students. Email margaretlanger50@gmail.com if you would like to share inclusion stories or efforts.