

INCLUSION:

A TEACHER'S VIEW



Barbara O'Brien was Samuel Habib's K-1-2 teacher in a multi-age classroom at Beaver Meadow Elementary School in Concord, New Hampshire. She has been an elementary school teacher since 1981 and has taught in a variety of grades as well as the school district's "Challenge Program" for gifted and talented students. In an interview conducted while Samuel was her student, O'Brien described how inclusion works in her classroom. She was interviewed by Mike Pride, former editor of the Concord Monitor newspaper.

How much training and education did you have on inclusion in the classroom?

I have had no formal training or education on or about inclusion.

What are your thoughts about inclusion?

As an elementary teacher, I believe that the word "inclusion" should describe almost any classroom. All classrooms have diverse learners, children with diverse backgrounds, children with challenges and children who may need extra time, equipment and/or specialists to help find the best way for them to learn. But I also believe that inclusion means that all children are equal members of their classroom community: everyone fully participates in all of the curriculum areas. Individual work may differ or the way to reach that child may differ, but everyone is learning together.

Inclusion takes more than the classroom teacher. I am fortunate that we are a team of specialists, educators and paraprofessionals who work closely together. We try to meet weekly as a team to

“ Inclusion forced me to become a better teacher. ” – BARBARA O'BRIEN

process and reflect and to work out any glitches, and we also work closely with families.

Inclusion takes time. Constant pre-planning needs to happen to make sure that the lessons are modified. There is also daily on-the-fly consult time between teachers and paraprofessionals. Time is spent ensuring that every child is an equal part of every field trip and activity.

What are your hopes for Samuel and how do you try to achieve your goals?

My hopes for Samuel are the same as for any child in my classroom. I want him to be an active learner who loves to learn and who asks great questions. I want all my children to become more independent and responsible as they become second graders in my class.

The main focus of the beginning of school is to build a community of learners, to make everyone feel comfortable and secure and cared for in our classroom, and to learn to accept and celebrate differences and similarities. Once our community is built, we begin our journey of learning together.

Is there still resistance and skepticism about inclusion among educators? How do you handle it?

Any resistance to inclusion that I have seen is due to someone being uncomfortable with challenges, being unaware of how to react or respond to a child, or just not knowing how to teach or talk to a child with disabilities.

In the last few years, at school or on field trips, I rarely have to handle a situation or redirect someone who responds in a negative or discriminatory manner; my class now takes over. They have informed guests that one of our classmates is still learning English and may need extra time to follow the directions. They have told the adults running the field trip to please not start the guided tour as they are waiting for their classmates who are using the elevator. And they

have reminded their new classmates that we wait patiently to hear what Samuel or any other child is saying; we do not speak for them.

Do you still hear from parents who think the extra time and effort it takes to include Samuel and other students with disabilities is time and effort taken away from their children? How would you answer such a complaint?

I have never heard a parent complain about this. I am wondering if my kids go home and talk to their families about our classroom that is made up of diverse learners. I have watched a child introduce a classmate to parents who might not know how to approach him or her. I have listened as children describe how a classmate shares using a form of sign or uses an augmentative communication device.

Have you seen attitudes about inclusion change?

When I first started teaching, I had names of children on my class roster whom I rarely saw as they spent most of their day in a resource room or even an outside placement. Later I had children who would spend parts of their day with me and then leave for long periods of time for specialized learning or small group work outside my room. Now I have children who leave to go to short, small group or individualized lessons, but these generally start after I have begun to build our classroom community and the child is ready to leave and reenter without feeling lost or left out.

