

Facilitating Membership in Head Start Classrooms

Ilene Schwartz: My name is Ilene Schwartz, and I'm the chair of special education at the University of Washington. Today, I'm going to talk about facilitating membership in Head Start Classrooms. Membership is an important concept when talking about inclusion and facilitating inclusive services for children with disabilities.

Before we talk about facilitating membership, I'd like to review what inclusion means. Inclusion is not a set of strategies or a placement issue. Inclusion is about belonging to a community, a group of friends, a school community, or a neighborhood.

One of the things I love about this definition is that it reminds us that inclusion is not about school. Inclusion is about being part of a group. Inclusion is about community. It's about being part of a neighborhood. It's about belonging.

When we talk about inclusion, we shouldn't talk about the children with disabilities, and say, "We have two or three inclusion students." We should talk about all the children who go to our school that go to our class, and if we have 18 children in our class, then we have 18 inclusion students.

Because inclusion is about making sure that we have a classroom environment in which everyone can do their very best work, and in which teachers receive the kind of support they need to ensure that children can do their very best work.

Inclusion is supported by the law. This is in a very important case when we talk about inclusion. The judge, in this case wrote, that inclusion is a right, not a privilege for a select few. The reason I love this quote and like to share it with people is that it tells us that inclusion is the place that we should start.

Children don't have to earn the right to be in your classroom. They have the right to be in the classroom because they live in your community, and then our job as early educators, is to support children so that they can learn and flourish.

When we talk about inclusion, I like to put up this picture, that shows the kind of things that children learn in inclusion. We know that children learn in a community of practice. They learn by doing things.

Many people say that children, in order to learn something, they have to do it. They have to see it. They have to taste it. We know that children learn through participation, and they learn by through participation in valued routines, rituals, and activities.

Now, when my colleagues and I have studied inclusion, what we found is that there are three big categories in which children make very big gains in the area of inclusion – membership, relationships, and skills.

I'm going to talk a lot about membership in a few minutes. I just want to touch on what relationships and skills are. Relationships are those things that develop between two children, a child and a child, friendships, peer activities, helping, and sometimes conflict, because we know children learn how to negotiate conflicts as part of developing relationships.

Relationships are important socially, and they're also important cognitively, because we learn so many things in the context of relationships. Now, skills are the things that we often think about traditionally learning in early learning settings.

Those are things like communication and self-care skills and motor skills and cognitive skills, and certainly those important, but we know that things like learning, how to make friends, learning how to be part of a group, all those things are equally important. In fact, those are the things that are going to help children be very successful in children in kindergarten, first grade.

Let's think about membership now and think about what a member is. A member is somebody who belongs to and participates in a particular group, and that could be, for example, a group of children that sit together at a snack table. It could be a group of children who are working on a particular art project. It could be a group of children who are putting on a play.

It could be bigger than that, and it could be a group of people who all have a birthday in the month of January. We think about signs of membership when we make accommodations to help children participate in groups and activities.

For example, if you have an assembly, and you call on everyone who has a birthday in January to stand up, you have to make sure that you include the child with a disability. Now that's a very simple example, but it can go on in different ways.

One of my favorite examples of membership is of a parent who told me she had a child with down syndrome, and they were very active in their church, and this child was functionally nonverbal. He had a couple words, but he was a member of the youth choir, and he was very proud about his membership in the youth choir.

As soon as they would hit church grounds, he would take off, and he would go and hang out with his friends who were part of the youth choir. He would sit with them at church, and he would participate. He had a tambourine that he would use during all the songs, and he was perfectly appropriate and a really valued member of that group.

What they had done in that group is found a way for him to participate. They didn't say, sorry, you're nonverbal. You can't sing. You can't be part of our group. What they did is they found a bridge, a bridge that allowed him to participate.

What are some strategies to facilitate membership? The first thing that we really want to think about is to think about the opportunities in our class where children have an opportunity to work together.

What are those activities? The more activities that we have, the more opportunities we will have to facilitate membership. Some simple examples are to assign children to groups at tables that are consistent over time.

For example, if children always eat their meals together, then they're going to know each other at their table. They're going to have some time to develop relationships, and they're going to be able to work into being members of that group.

You might also want to do some things where you design activities, that support multiple participants. For example, if there are some very preferred activities, for example, some art

projects or a sensory table, it might be that you can't go over there by yourself, that you have to go with another person, and that again facilitates memberships.

Another thing that's really important is to encourage children, to help each other, and that is a way of looking at the culture of your classroom. If the culture of your classroom becomes that we all do better when everyone is doing well, then that's going to help children learn to help other people become members of a group.

If you have a classroom where it's okay to exclude children, then you're less likely to facilitate a lot of membership. It goes back to the Vivian Paley book, that says, "You can't say, you can't play." That in all our classroom everyone's a member and everyone is included.

Finally, you want to make sure that there's something that everyone can do independently. If you're doing a group activity, an art project, you want to make sure that there's something in that art project that challenges the child who has the most developed skills and the child who needs the most help.

Make sure there's something that, that child can do independently. Even if everything is already cut out for that child and all they have to do is glue or match or something very simple.

Finally, you want to have fun and help your students have fun, because if your students are having fun in your classroom, they're going to be eager to come back, and they're going to want to be members of your class. Thanks a lot, and I hope you have some good discussions about membership and that you can help your children be members of your classroom.