Shannon Simonelli:

All right. I'd like to welcome our listeners back to our third and final piece of conversation with Dr. Susan Stainback. I'll turn it over to Julie so she can begin.

Julie: [00:10]

Thank you, Shannon.

Susan, we've been talking about different aspects of inclusive education and some things that teachers can do in the classroom and so on. I kind of want us to back up a little bit and talk about some of the teachers' concerns about engaging in inclusive practices for all students. Often what I see when I go in to schools and so on is students with more mild disabilities are more likely to be part of an inclusive classroom. But then teachers are very nervous and not sure and lack confidence in having children in their classroom who have more significant academic disabilities or have more behavioral challenges, for example. Some teachers are, and understandably so, very nervous about having children who display more aggressive behaviors within their classroom. So I'm wondering if you might take a minute to address some of those concerns or maybe some ideas about how they might get the supports they need.

Susan: [1:19]

Okay. I think first, who should be in. Obviously, I believe everybody should. I really think if we want every person to grow up and be a respected member of the community, we can't exclude some of the children from their peers during their formative years. If we truly value diversity in our society, segregation in our schools can't be justified. This is really just a function of inclusion. It's moral thoughts; value judgments. It's what you believe. And if you do believe that, you can't separate children during their maturational years and expect them then to all get along when they get older.

I think a part of that is the issue with aggressive behavior, as well as other kinds of inappropriate social behaviors that some children exhibit. There's always a point that a child might potentially be dangerous. This is one of those difficult problems that needs to be solved if inclusion is going to work. It's not like there's that many of them. It's not like there's that many children that are very, very aggressive. Children who do not have disabilities, there are aggressive children there, too. I mean it's not any one group where you're going to have children that could potentially be dangerous to their peers. That's pretty obvious from the things that happened in the schools, even to the point of children bringing weapons in and things like that. There's no one group.

I do think there are ways to deal with it. There's a variety of ways, and I think that's where brainstorming and problem-solving, getting the children involved, and it really has to be on the situation, depending on the child and the classroom and that kind of thing.

There was a movie, Educating Peter, several years ago. And they showed how one school dealt with the problem.

One thing you have to think about in terms of including a child that is aggressive is under controlled circumstances, all children can learn about potentially erratic behavior. They also can learn how to deal with it. And so rather than, because at different times in our lives we're faced with it. So this gives children an opportunity to learn, but also through the peer interaction and the feedback to the child that needs to learn self-control is given the opportunity to learn to behave in a socially appropriate manner.

Julie: [4:19]

I think sometimes the aggression that we see in students in more segregated settings is on account of they're feeling like they don't belong with their natural age mates, and that they've been kind of cast off to somewhere else. They may have that perception. And so if they're internalizing those kinds of stereotypes that go with them, doesn't that seem to kind of feed their aggression toward the school and an aggression toward their natural age mates?

Susan: [4:55]

When you say, and I'll come back to it again, it's like putting five children who can't talk together. If you put five very aggressive students together, you know, it's just going to escalate.

But in turn, if you truly can get the feeling of community and inclusion going, all children can feel that they're welcome. They can feel that they're not a failure, that they're a success. They can feel that if they get in to a tough situation, there's somebody there that'll help them. And that's all part of the process of an inclusive situation.

Julie: [5:37]

I guess I can speak to that a little bit. In my own experience, when I taught adjudicated youth in a segregated facility a number of years back, it was almost an aggression academy. What they didn't know what to do … the skills and aggression that they didn't have before they came, they certainly learned them there. And I think that plays right on what's happening there.

On the opposite side of that, though, I've also seen in some of the schools that I've worked with here, where students that they were a little nervous about bringing into the gen ed classroom and being part of an inclusive community of learners, that much of that aggression faded away once they had that sense of belonging that you were just speaking about.

Susan: [6:22]

I agree with you. I think inclusion solves a myriad of problems for all of us. I'm not just talking about people that may have been labeled or people that have potentially

dangerous behaviors, but all of us. It gives us the support and comfort of knowing that we belong. ??? 6:44

Julie: [6:45]

To shift kind of to the other side of the continuum of concerns that teachers have,-- aggression and misbehavior, as we might say,-- in the classroom is one area of concern.

The other side of that concern are students who are academically so much further behind the levels that schools indicate academically. And so I wanted to know if you could speak just a little bit about maybe the value of universally designed lessons. That's not to say you have to throw your curriculum out, but using that curriculum and giving it to kids in a way that's more universally designed, and then differentiated to accommodate the different range of learning that each of the children have.

Susan: [7:34]

Well, I think that it goes back to the teacher being a facilitator and setting up the environment so that there's opportunity for a broad range of levels and a broad range of different things, because sometimes children are not ready in science to learn the table of elements, but they're learning about hot and cold. But people can interact in a way that it can be done.

And again, getting children to brainstorm. Say, "Okay. We need to learn about this. What are some things you'd like to do so we can use it." ??? 8:16 And then setting up the environment so it works.

Also, if we teach the concept of mutual support and mutual trust, then the child sitting next to the individual learning hot and cold just says, 'Hey. Look at that." ??? 8:32 And be almost like a one-to-one teacher while they're doing their thing. Say, 'I have these things here, and I'm putting this together. Which one's hot? Which one's cold?"

Actually, another aspect of that is when we need to teach something, we actually learn it better because we have to internalize it, think about it, and put it out in a way that we feel that another individual will understand. So it just reinforces the strengths in those areas of the children that are further ahead.

Julie: [9:15]

And it gives some children some power too. I mean, not over others. But it gives them power in themselves, and a sense of accomplishment to have been able to teach another peer a certain skill or a body of knowledge.

I think your larger point here is rather than it being, rather than schools in the very traditional, very teacher-directed, teacher-centered types of arrangements, that if we allow ourselves to let go of some of that and arrange it in a way that it's effectively student-centered, then we'll be able to facilitate this so much better. Is that kind of what I'm hearing?

Susan: [9:53]

Mm-hmm. There's actual ideas on doing it. These are not really new concepts, but they're just labeled different as the years go along. That the concept of universal design, so that all children have access to different ways of learning, to differentiated instruction so that they get what they need. Co-teaching, so that … We've talked about that before. Computer-assisted instruction. All those things. Peer tutoring.

Julie: [10:34]

It kind of requires that the schools look at doing what needs to be done, but doing it in kind of a different way than … You know, it seems like over the years that there's certain little efforts that go, that are tried. And then it's like a flash in a pan. And then all of a sudden they just abandon that.

And maybe this would be a nice time to kind of back up a little bit and talk about how a school can actually facilitate a genuinely inclusive school. In some of my experiences, when I visit with schools, the administrators are really interested in supporting this. But it seems like when we start talking with teachers individually, and I'm not going to rip on either side of this, but you know how there is that dichotomy in schools between general ed and special ed? In my experiences, it seems like the special ed teachers have more fear of moving into inclusive practices than the general educators do. Not that they're without fear, but overall, the pattern that I encounter is the resistance that comes from the fear of the special educators more than it does the general educators. So I'm kind of wondering if you can address that issue in the context of what administrators and entire schools can do to kind of really take some significant and meaningful steps in this direction.

Susan: [12:03]

I think one thing, in terms of why people in special ed seem to be more resistant, some people believe that their jobs are on the line, that they'll actually lose their jobs, although that's not the case with the co-teaching. All expertise of all of the educators and children and everybody else is needed.

Julie: [12:28]

I think one of the other concerns is not only that, because I don't think they have selfishly, … I don't think they have a conscious thought about being selfish, about "oh my God, I might lose my job." I think, just like the other teachers, their first concern is really what's in the best interest of the students. But it seems like many of the special ed people are really fearful that if they go out in to the general ed, the child might not make it. And so they really feel that if they stay with them in special ed that the child will actually do better.

Susan: [13:06]

I do believe that in special ed, and I've been trained in special ed, is that we're taught to believe that.

And now things are changing. Not only the research, but the practice shows that children have greater opportunities and learn better in heterogeneous classrooms. ??? 13:26 That's not where our basic core training came from as a general rule. I think that has an effect.

I think that in terms of schools, I think teachers need to be more empowered just like students do, so that the teachers have the opportunity to brainstorm and make changes in the school that they feel would be worthwhile to the children and try some things. Like I said, I don't believe there's a set of steps. I think every place is different and people are different. So you kind of have to try things.

But in that same vein, in the past, educational administrators have been makers of policy, and that was their role, to be overseer. I think administrators need to take on a different role, just like we do as teachers, and they become facilitators of the development and implementation of inclusive activities, rather than just policy makers. That way the teachers, like the students, are empowered. Not the system. The system isn't telling them what to do. They're making the system. And they're having the system …

Well, actually to get back with the idea of standard curriculum versus more differentiated, rather than having the child not fit the system, we look at it that the system doesn't fit the child. So we change the system without trying to change the child. It's difficult because administrators have always been in the role of being kind of the overseers of policy. But with involving teachers and students, they're the people that are closest to the learning process. They're the people that are involved in it. So they also, with this empowerment, gain some control over their own lives in educational situations they encounter. So I don't think people would fear it as much. From what I've seen, people don't fear it as much because they know that if they see something not working they can modify it. They can work with their peers to modify it. Is that what you were asking?

Julie: [16:03]

Yeah. I was thinking about what you were talking about, and some of the challenges in a rather large department of education here and how the roles of administrators might evolve and what it would actually take to accomplish that. That's kind of where my mind was and thinking that is truly a challenge. I think the ideas that you just put out there have a lot of merit. It will take us a while to be able to implement those things on a local basis, I suspect. But in the meantime, as individual administrators and teachers want to make a move in this direction, can you just identify maybe one or two things that they might do to actually make a really strong step in the direction of creating an inclusive classroom or an inclusive school, just to cap this off?

Susan: [17:04]

I think one thing we can do is, in the spirit of working together, we can have a school, or classroom, or whatever level you can work it at, a task force to look at how we can all work better together, how we can all help one another. How we can accomplish some of these things that we're setting out to try to promote in our lives, in our society, and in our community, in our families. You know, it's all the same, and

bring people together to do that. Start collecting materials. I think then it's just simply public relations, making people aware that "Oh, okay. When Joanie won the spelling bee, that was very nice for Joanie, but …"

I have an example that really upset me. I was reading a big city newspaper, and they were saying how rigorous their schools were. An example they used was that only 70% of the kindergarteners were allowed in to the first grade. That just blew my mind. You know, first, basically it's saying that they're not instilling the skills that they feel that they should have before they get to first grade. But more importantly, they're destroying 30% of the children's confidence before they even get to first grade.

Julie: [18:51]

Wow. And I was reading not long ago, aside from the death of a parent, failing a grade is one of the most traumatic experiences that a child can have, second only to the death of a parent.

Susan: [19:00]

I think people don't, when we're operators and we're the superintendent or whoever, or we're the parent and we don't want anything to happen, to lessen the ability for our children to gain the most they can, we don't look at those things. We're kind of blinded, because they're not the things that are brought up. I think a lot of it is simply making people aware of just how devastating it is. You know, failure is so devastating.

Julie: [19:38]

Right. And on the opposite side of that, it's always easier to point out the negatives than the positives. But knowing how devastating those experiences can be, maybe as you said, the whole public relations thing. Maybe we all need to be spending a little more time focusing on what the possibilities are, and looking at the value of human beings beyond just academic performance on a standardized test. There are all different ways that we as human beings contribute to this planet. We all have something to offer. Acknowledging that, even if it's not an academic skill that turns up on a standardized test, there are other things of value that make you part of this society, this planet we call home. We all have something to offer one another.

Susan: [20:36]

I think that sometimes there are situations in the news that make it so obvious. You know, the young lady that attacked the other ice skater. And that's just a function of competition. What possibilities there could've been for those two women if they had worked together. How much they could've learned from one another.

Julie: [21:10]

Right. And I think that's a good example.

Shannon: [21:17]

Yeah. And I think we're pretty much to the end of our conversation. I just want to thank you both and just reflect for a moment myself that I so appreciate that we've taken the topic of inclusive education and we've really expanded it to not only being about inclusive classrooms and including children with a variety of differences, but that we've really looked at it throughout the school setting and including teachers and including administrators and how that really moves with us through our whole life cycle in terms of creating an environment of inclusion and how that really is sort of our human need and human nature in a higher aspect. I'm really grateful for that.

Susan: [21:54]

Can I respond to that, because I agree completely. I think that Gandhi made a statement. He said our ability to reach unity and diversity may be the beauty and test of our civilization.

I believe inclusion in our schools is just one step along the path toward reaching that unity: recognizing that interconnectedness and building on the diversity of each person brings strength to the whole world. It's that far-reaching.

Shannon: [22:29]

That's right.

Julie:

That's beautiful.

Shannon:'

I think that's a perfect ending note. Thank you both so much.

Julie:

Well, thank you.

Shannon:

Yes. I want to thank our listeners and invite them back to our next Effective Practice Briefing in the series. Aloha.