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Teacher Talk in collaboration with OECD

“Making Schools More Inclusive: Teaching Students with Special Needs”

Saturday October 7th, 2017

- **Armine Gevorgyan**, Teacher, Anania Shirakatsy International Lyceum, Armenia
- **Aggeliki Papa**, Founder, I Love Dyslexia, Greece
- **Yasser Anass Sadek Ahmed**, Teacher, Al Sadara School, UAE

Moderated by: **Tarek Mostafa**, Analyst, Early Childhood and Schools, Directorate for Education and Skills, OECD

Summary/key points

As schools across the world move towards integrating students with special needs into mainstream classrooms, teachers will be required to ensure that these diverse groups of learners are provided with equal opportunities to learn. But what are the current challenges that teachers face in educating students with special needs? What can teachers do to foster even more support for those with special needs in the future?

According to a poll taken during the session, 70 per cent of participants felt there was a higher need for more professional development in the area of special needs. One of the biggest challenges in incorporating special needs students into classrooms is finding the time to accommodate them. Teachers report that they spend 4.2% less time on classroom management than on teaching when they have between 1-10% of students with special needs, said Mostafa. To address this issue, it is essential to have smooth lines of communication between school administrators, teachers, support staff, parents and other children in the class.

“Our responsibility is academic support,” said Ahmed. “Obtain their names and the coordinator will collect all the students and give them an idea of the different types of disabilities and cases.”

Teachers must create a healthy atmosphere in the classroom, one that is free of bullying and promotes not only acceptance, but celebration of different abilities. “I live for the day when the first question wouldn’t be ‘what are the challenges of working with special needs’ but ‘what are the privilege of working with special needs students’,” said Papa. “My approach is I love Dyslexia, that is my way of shaking people to understand that we are all different, students are all gifted.”





Worries about time and the attitudes of other children melt away when the teacher sets out to have a genuine compassionate relationship with each and every student. “So you need to make it very clear to the students that every student matters, that every student has a gift to give the world,” said Papa. “When you value every student and you don’t see a disabled student but a student who is able, then the students will too.”

Teachers need to be adaptable in their approach, both in instruction and testing. If a child cannot understand time on a clock for example, there is no use in questioning them about it on an exam. Rather, that item can be dropped for that particular student and a different one can be added. Also, students with disabilities may not process information the way their classmates do, so teachers need to always be on the lookout for signs they don’t understand. They can then alter their methods for those who are better visual learners, or those that are more verbal.

The use of symbols to cement grammatical concepts has worked for Papas as does regular, informal, ongoing assessments that the techniques she is using are getting through. This can be as basic as stopping to get a thumbs up or a thumbs down.

Ahmed tries to provide teachers with as many training opportunities as possible, so they can navigate diagnostics and reports. It’s also important to focus more intently on parents, who can tend to be more sensitive than their counterparts when it comes to their special needs children.

Gevorgyan has leaned heavily on her school psychologist in some cases. And Ahmed said ideally, each school would have a variety of services to call on if necessary. “Occupational therapy, speech therapy, all of these services, if they are provided in schools it would make things much easier for parents and for teachers,” he said.

Teachers should always remember that when they are struggling to meet the needs of their students, a simple and direct question may be all that is required to move forward. “When you are confused and you don’t know what to do, just ask your student how can I help you?” said Papa. “You will be surprised the answer your student will tell you, I would like you to do this. And you will have a golden key in your hand.”

It is also important to remember that many special needs students can be exceptionally gifted in other areas, and to look for those aspects, such as the second-grade autistic student Ahmed recalled who performed academically at a fifth-grade level.

Main Takeaway: The most effective methods of creating schools that are more inclusive for people with special needs is more education for teachers and creating an atmosphere where different abilities are celebrated, not merely catered to.





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