Interview with Cathy van der Mark

October 22, 2020

*Today, I had the privilege of speaking with Cathy van der Mark, the Director of Inclusive Education for School District 27.*

"We always start with the student" (van der Mark, 2020).

Cathy is new to our school district and brings a desire to take a holistic approach to inclusive education. She wants "special education" viewed through a different, more inclusive lens. Cathy has worked with the Ministry of Education and brings with her copious insightful information about Special Education and UDL. I found it insightful that inclusive education covers more than learning disabilities; it also encompasses social-emotional needs and trauma students.

After discussing this point with Cathy, I recollected a student in one of my previous classes who had suffered severe burns due to a home Science experiment. She became upset during a Remembrance Day assembly video, which showed explosions. I had not considered how such a video might have affected her and allowed her to leave the assembly. After witnessing this event, I was mindful of not including any "chemical experiments" in our Science classes. She needed to feel included in Science activities without feeling excluded from classroom activities.

Cathy explained to me how teacher observation is of crucial importance. For example, suppose a teacher notices a student who continually struggles with writing while most others understand. In that case, they need to see if changes to the instructional approach remedies the situation, "Is it *how* the student is accessing the information or is something *blocking their mind* from accessing this information? Problems with writing can be an issue with mental understanding or a fine motor issue" (van der Mark 2020). Whether or not a student's formal assessment is required, the teacher needs to adjust instruction to include this student in all classroom activities.

"*Find out what they can do, instead of dealing with what they can't"* (van der Mark, 2020).

These 'bypass strategies' do more than simply attempt to improve the weakness; they focus on what the child *can* do. Besides, inclusive education strategies will seek ways to ensure the student is still involved with class activities. If possible, we need to remove the deficit.

Cathy and I discussed the "speech to text" feature on an iPad. I had another grade seven student who was on an IEP for a learning disability. This student was reading well beyond grade level and could recall Social Studies facts with ease, yet if asked to write answers to questions, there was a disconnect between her mind and what she wrote. The student became skilled with the speech to text feature and used it for longer pieces of written work. She spent most of her time working in the classroom with her peers, with the odd exception when she needed a quiet space to use the iPad. She felt included and was able to complete class assignments with confidence. Over the past few years, her teachers had made observations and gathered information to figure out the best inclusive options for her education.

I also asked Cathy about a strategy that I had used with a student coping with a learning disability in Math. I provided each student with a multiplication table sheet during assignments and tests to support him with his multiplication facts without exposing his struggles to his peers. She referred to this as a "Universal Support." The student received the help he needed and the confidence to work among his peers.

Cathy also explained "Central Supports" to me. I worked as a TTOC in a class that had an excellent inclusive station for a non-verbal student. The child had his own space within the classroom, but it was open to the rest of the room. He could see the other students, and they could see him, and there was plenty of space for the CEA to work with the student.

"*What can we do to make sure they feel they belong in their environment*?" (van der Mark, 2020).

This particular classroom was a perfect example of making this non-verbal student included with his peers while providing the tools that he needed for a safe and positive learning environment.

Children want to feel that they belong. Inclusive education strategies are working toward meeting the students' needs while giving them a sense of belonging. Another reflection I discussed with Cathy was another small group of students who had always been removed from the classroom to work with the Education Assistant. They did not have any particular designation or learning disability, but they required guided instruction. I began my year by continuing this "tradition," yet when I saw the despondent look on the girls' faces when the EA called them for their group time, I knew that something needed to change. We began keeping the EA in the classroom, circulating to help all students while subtly spending a little extra time with the students in her group.

Cathy concluded our discussion by explaining that we need to develop culture and capacity and meet the students' needs and respond to the information that we have about them. We need to move beyond merely integrating. Inclusion happens when the planning includes all students' needs. Finally, inclusive education is not only about academic competencies; it is about the all curricular competencies that now exist within our new British Columbia curriculum.

Reference

Van der Mark, Cathy. (2020, October 22). Inclusive Education Interview. School District 27 Support Services, Williams Lake, British Columbia.

Reflection:

The most revealing aspect of my interview with Cathy is that I had been applying inclusive education according to my instinct to help everyone in my class! I enjoyed the challenge of helping a diverse group of students meet their learning goals. As Cathy discussed the various supports used for inclusive teaching, I thought about some of my previous students. I am fortunate that I had the experience to use it as a reference point. During my grade seven teaching assignment, I had a mentor who always encouraged me to learn as much as possible about my students to develop a trusting relationship that will help decide the appropriate learning strategies.

Shortly after beginning this reflection, I was able to spend time with my grade seven practicum class! I asked as many of them as possible questions about their interests, favourite subjects, and hobbies. Two of the students are on IEPs, and one is a Category H with behaviour issues. I gave the students instructions for a poetry activity and thought quickly about reaching the students on IEPs and Student “H.” One boy liked to work with a partner, so I allowed this, ensuring they maintained their focus. I checked in with them often to make sure they were completing their work. Student “H” wasn’t interested in settling into the assignment, so I worked with him one question at a time, having a short discussion about each answer. I had him write a sentence while I monitored the other students, helping where necessary. After two questions, he began to focus and patiently waited for me to return to complete the next question. For the rest of the day, he was calm and relatively focused.

During Math, I needed to provide support for a “high-flyer” (Stevens, 2020). The student quickly breezed through his work and asked if he could begin his homework assignment. These situations are almost more challenging than providing extra help. You need to think quickly! I didn’t want him to get too far ahead, as the assignment was for homework, so I engaged him in a conversation about the worksheet. There wasn’t quite enough time to give him an extra task, which was a chance to learn more about this student. We had a short chat, and then I allowed him to begin his homework. He also volunteered to help other people in his group.

I debriefed with the classroom teacher at the end of the day. She was happy with the way Student H had responded to my guidance. The results of my interaction with the class reminded me of Cathy’s advice, “Find out what they can do, instead of dealing with what they can’t” (van der Mark 2020). I took the time to understand how this particular student would best complete the assignment and help him achieve his goal. It was a rewarding day!