



# From Special Education Teacher to Inclusion Facilitator

Role Revelations and Revolutions

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The role of the special education teacher has changed dramatically since the 1980s. The focus of educational law and practice concerning students with disabilities has shifted from gaining student access to education to improving student academic results, as measured in part by their progress within the general education curriculum and their membership in general education classrooms (Hardman & Nagle, 2004; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 [PL 105-17]). As a result of this shift, special education teachers are being required to assume different and more comprehensive responsibilities (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997). Despite this change in the role of the special educator, few teacher education programs have been on the forefront or have even kept up with this trend. Although the ability of educators to teach all students well has become a rhetorical high ground, this goal has yet to be reflected in traditional general or special teacher education programs (Brownell, Rosenberg, Sindelar, & Smith, 2004). Thus, there is a need to define roles, responsibilities, and titles that bridge the gap between changing expectations and the way that special educators are being prepared.

This chapter will describe areas in which the special educator's role has changed most dramatically, including

- The evolution of job titles, position responsibilities, and knowledge and expertise

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- The shift from classroom teacher to facilitator of supports through team collaboration
- The increasing emphasis on advocacy and schoolwide leadership
- The increasing responsibilities as liaison between school, home, and the community

## EVOLUTION OF A NEW ROLE

Throughout the years, efforts to include all students into the general education setting have been known by many names. *Mainstreaming* was the term used in the mid-1970s to describe the practice of having students with disabilities receive most of their education in separate classes, although part of their school day was spent in general education classes such as art, music, and physical education. *Integration* was coined in the late 1970s to describe the practice in which students with disabilities were full-time members of general education classes, even if they continued to learn from a different curriculum and had different expectations. Today, *inclusion* is defined as the practice of educating all students in general education classes, including those students with the most significant disabilities, with support being provided to enable both students and teachers to be successful.

Many people who are trained as professional special education teachers experience a contradiction between their academic preparation and what is expected of them in the field. In the past, early definitions of best practices included community-based functional skills programs, individualized education programs (IEPs) that emphasized therapeutic interventions, pseudofriendship programs such as peer buddies, and segregated classrooms. Today, best practices for students with disabilities demand that teachers acquire a different set of skills during their initial and continuing professional education, such as strategies for teaching all students literacy skills, creating socially just school communities, facilitating authentic friendships, embedding service learning into the curriculum for all students, being accountable for every student's achievement, and promoting inclusion in general education (Jorgensen, 2003).

For many special educators, moving from special education to general education is as awkward as visiting another country without knowing the language or the cultural expectations. The authors of this book searched for special educators who have experienced this educational and cultural change firsthand, making the transi-

tion from teaching in self-contained classrooms to supporting students with disabilities to become fully participating members of the general education classroom and school.

One indicator of this transition is the introduction of a new job title and role for many special educators: inclusion facilitator. An Internet search of the term *inclusion facilitator*, conducted in August 2004, produced more than 1,000 references. Schools and school districts across the country (including those in San Francisco; Greenwich, Connecticut; Delaware; Lisle and Indian Prairie, Illinois; White Elementary School, Kansas; Maine; Allegheny County, Maryland; Newton and Belchertown, Massachusetts; Ewing, New Jersey; New York; Altoona, Pennsylvania; Pasadena, Texas; Utah; Vermont; and Fairfax County, Virginia) and around the world have developed new job titles to describe those teachers who facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities into general education settings. These titles consist of inclusion facilitator, inclusion teacher, integration facilitator, inclusion support teacher, inclusion specialist, learning specialist, and inclusion consultant, among others. In addition, many other teachers, such as life skills teachers, resource teachers, educational liaisons, and special education teachers, fulfill the role of facilitating inclusion, even though their job titles do not use the term *inclusion facilitator*.

Dr. Douglas Fisher, a faculty member in the teacher education program at San Diego State University and author of many publications about inclusive education, remarked

*No terms are the same in California as they are in the rest of the country. But, we are good at translating. In San Diego, the position of a teacher who supports inclusion of students with significant disabilities is called "inclusion itinerant," whereas it is called "inclusion support teacher" in Palm Springs, and "advocate teacher" in East County.*

Regardless of the job title or position description, this new role requires significant changes, especially for those teachers whose previous duties primarily involved teaching students in "special," self-contained classrooms. What are these teachers' biggest challenges in their new role as inclusion facilitators? What prepared them for this changing role? What information and skills do they wish they had before assuming what has been the career challenge of a lifetime?

To answer these questions, one of the authors, Mary Schuh, interviewed four self-defined inclusion facilitators: Elaine Dodge, Sandy

Hunt, Catherine Lunetta, and Frank Sgambati. All four are educators who have been in the field anywhere from 3 to 27 years and were trained as special education teachers. Interviews were conducted by telephone, in face-to-face conversations, and through follow-up e-mails if clarification was necessary. Dr. Schuh developed questions to learn about the following:

- Their titles and responsibilities
- The knowledge and skills they believe are necessary to be effective as inclusion facilitators
- The shift from classroom teacher to facilitator of supports through team collaboration
- The increasing emphasis on advocacy and schoolwide leadership to support all students
- Their increasing responsibilities to serve as liaisons between school, home, and the community
- Their views on what it takes to create sustainability within their school communities

### **Evolution of Position Responsibilities, Knowledge Needed, and Job Titles**

The evolution of job titles and responsibilities related to the practice of including all students in general education settings is similar across school districts. The interviews revealed that educators who work as inclusion facilitators—no matter what their title—must develop a wide range of knowledge in addition to educational, administrative, and communication skills. Because contemporary position responsibilities have expanded across a number of skill sets and fluctuate daily, inclusion facilitators must also be able to respond to change flexibly, quickly, creatively, and competently.

***Biographical Information*** Inclusion facilitators are known by different titles, and the interviewees shared diverse experiences related to their current role expectations.

*Elaine Dodge* On leave from her school position and currently working as Distinguished Educator for the New Hampshire Department of Education, Elaine travels around the state providing training and technical assistance to teams who are developing stu-

dents' alternate assessment portfolios. When she first entered the profession, she taught at a segregated school for students with disabilities. For the last 20 years, however, she has worked in public schools supporting the inclusion of students with significant disabilities.

When Elaine worked as the inclusion facilitator at Moultonborough Academy, New Hampshire, her title was Life Skills Teacher. Working with approximately eight students, all with varying needs, Elaine's job required her to wear many professional hats. Her students varied in age and grade level, disability label, and the priority of their educational goals.

"Most of my students were working on a regular high school diploma, so I had to support them in mainstream classes, supervise their paraprofessionals, and facilitate the input of related service providers," she recalled. Elaine also taught a remedial reading class for middle school students and a high school-level consumer math class. She needed to be skilled in teaching reading and math to a diverse group of students, and as a team leader she had to employ highly developed communication and management skills.

*Sandy Hunt* Sandy has been a special educator for 27 years, including her current position as an elementary school inclusion coordinator. She taught for many years at Mt. Lebanon School, in Lebanon, New Hampshire, which pioneered inclusion in New Hampshire in the 1980s. Sandy now supports 25 students with significant disabilities in four different schools. Sandy's position responsibilities include providing support to general education teachers, serving as the team leader to plan and implement student supports, serving as home-school liaison, and evaluating and supervising paraprofessionals.

"I am not in any one school for a whole day, so I connect the paraprofessionals to their teachers and principals. I am a support teacher to the process," she described. In this configuration of the inclusion facilitator role, Sandy must effectively use a range of skills including evaluation and supervision, time management, and scheduling to accommodate the four school sites. She also uses her solid background in education in her role as the specialist assigned to students with severe disabilities.

*Catherine Lunetta* Before getting her master's degree in education, Catherine worked for more than 20 years as a social worker. Her current title is Special Education Liaison, and her responsibilities are wide-ranging. She is the administrator who coordinates the

development of students' IEPs and their initial and 3-year evaluations, and she facilitates team meetings for a variety of purposes.

"That is the easy stuff," Catherine laughed. "My more important responsibilities are making sure that students are successful in inclusive classrooms and making sure that the supports are in the classrooms to accommodate their needs and the needs of the overall class and teachers."

Catherine supports 20 students in one elementary school (in grades 3–5) who experience a variety of educational challenges, such as hearing difficulties, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, English as a second language, learning disabilities, behavioral challenges, autism spectrum disorders, and multiple disabilities. Catherine's role changes from consultant to administrator to expert, depending on the situation. Similar to other inclusion facilitators, she must possess a high level of knowledge across a variety of educational fields to succeed in her role.

*Frank Sgambati* Frank has had a long and productive career in special education. He began his career as an assistant teacher of children with significant disabilities who attended a program in a church basement before the first federal special education law (i.e., Education for All Handicapped Children Act, PL 94-142) was passed in 1975. From 1978 until 1987, he was a teacher at Laconia State School and Training Center, which was at that time New Hampshire's state institution for people with significant disabilities. Shortly before Laconia became the first public institution in the United States to close in 1992, he left to work for the New Hampshire Department of Education as the first state consultant for students labeled as having "severe and profound" disabilities. These students were being educated in public schools for the first time, and Frank's job was to provide training and technical assistance to local teams. Frank collaborated closely with the Institute on Disability (IOD) at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) during his work with the state department; after working together with this organization to help many schools become more inclusive, Frank decided he needed to experience firsthand what it was like to support students in general education classes.

From 1991 until 1995, Frank worked as an inclusion facilitator in the Kearsarge Regional School District; from 1995 until the present, he has been a technical assistance consultant with the IOD supporting local schools' capacities to educate all children within inclusive general education settings.

**Knowledge and Skills** When students were first included in general education classrooms, most parents and educators were content if students were invited to birthday parties, received telephone calls from classmates, and were generally accepted into the classroom community (Falvey, 1995; Strully & Strully, 1989). Increasingly, however, all concerned individuals are paying greater attention to students' learning, including the development of literacy skills such as reading, writing, and technology use, and the acquisition of core academic knowledge (Erickson, Koppenhaver, Yoder, & Nance, 1997; McSheehan, Sonnenmeier, & Jorgensen, 2002; Wehmeyer, Sands, Knowlton, & Kozleski, 2002). Thus, inclusion facilitators must have demonstrated competence in general education, special education, and a variety of facilitation skills (e.g., consulting, mediation, coaching) to be successful in their roles. Each inclusion facilitator interviewed expressed frustration about his or her preservice education. They recommended that undergraduate and graduate programs provide future special education teachers with a clearer understanding about their roles and the experience and educational background needed to work in the field.

Sandy explained that her work currently focuses on connecting students with their classmates and supporting meaningful access to the curriculum. She commented, "Back when I was prepared to be a teacher, people didn't think that students with significant disabilities could access the general curriculum, so they didn't teach us to have high expectations." Sandy has worked in her role as inclusion facilitator for 11 years, learning primarily through in-service training workshops, participation in special model demonstration projects, or simply through "trial by fire."

Catherine wished her degree program had taught her more about managing the actual classroom teaching process, such as how to effectively support two students in one class when they are not performing at grade level or have physical or behavioral challenges. She remarked,

*I wish I had learned more in the area of literacy instruction and curriculum adaptation techniques for all students. I don't want to just supplement what is happening; I want to be qualified to have a good basis on how to teach students.*

Catherine said that her special education degree program did not provide her with an adequate background in general education. She took one reading class, but it was not enough to prepare her with the skills she would need in her role as inclusion facilitator.

“Reading is so important . . . and there is so much self-esteem and social relationships tied to reading,” she noted.

Elaine considered it crucial to improve students’ reaching and grasping, to focus their eye gaze, and to teach them other access skills. “Skills need to be drilled, learned, and generalized,” she added.

To improve student outcomes and increase access to and participation in general education settings, an inclusion facilitator must connect the knowledge and skills needed to coordinate and implement a variety of student supports. Elaine had to learn about collaboration and teaming skills, technology, and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) on her own. “Most assistive technology wasn’t available when I started, [so I had to] keep an open mind about new approaches and to become as computer literate as possible and stay abreast of new developments.”

Because the knowledge needed to work effectively as an inclusion facilitator is broad, the interviewees identified a variety of competencies needed to prepare for their roles, including

- Administration, management, and collaboration skills
- Teaching techniques—especially literacy
- Specialized knowledge in the areas of movement, personal care, communication, assistive technology, and emotional-behavioral and social relationships

These broad knowledge and skill areas have been organized into a set of competencies for inclusion facilitators based on research (Ryndak, Clark, Conroy, & Stuart, 2001) and recommendations from a variety of national professional organizations such as the Council for Exceptional Children, TASH (formerly The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps), and the American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR). Appendix A, described more fully in Chapter 9, contains a description of the competencies that form the foundation of the UNH’s Inclusion Facilitator Teacher Education Option.

**Job Titles** Job titles may seem incidental, but creating and using an accurate title consistently and throughout differing cultures and fields helps others to identify and understand what might be expected from the person holding a particular position. The terms *principal* and *superintendent*, for example, are precise job titles that evoke an understanding of the responsibilities and skills



needed for the two positions. Most interviewees expressed this need for clarity in their job titles and felt the term *inclusion facilitator* best represented their roles.

Frank did not even have a job title during the years he served as a de facto inclusion facilitator in a regional school district between 1991 and 1995! Nevertheless, he had firsthand experience with the evolutionary change from special education teacher to inclusion facilitator. He recalled

*I saw myself as a change agent as well as someone who had to do a lot of training for families [and] general and special educators, as well as supervise paraprofessionals and support teams. I also saw myself as the liaison between families and schools and a link to the school board. The term “inclusion facilitator” was accurate for the day-to-day support that I provided to students and their teams.*

Frank understood the importance of creating clarity around the position and advocated that his job title be *inclusion facilitator* to meet the emergent literature and research in the field, as well as the daily, far-reaching responsibilities of the position.

Although Elaine and Catherine are comfortable with the term *inclusion facilitator*, Sandy expressed some unease about her current title as an inclusion coordinator because she wondered if it inaccurately related to the concept of an inclusion program. She cautioned,

*[The term inclusion coordinator] is an oxymoron. When you indicate that someone is an inclusion coordinator and attached to a specific program, this is in direct conflict with the effort to include all students in age-appropriate typical grades and classes.*

Sandy believes that the language people use has an impact on the way people view teachers' responsibilities. She pointed out,

*Long ago when these positions were conceived, we were bringing students back [from out-of-district placements] so it was our job to “include” children who were never in the building. I think we are way beyond that, and it makes sense to revisit the title.*

Frank also warned about viewing the title as a panacea. He noted,

*I think the inclusion facilitator title is adequate, but you can't put too much into titles. I would love for the day to*

*come when we didn't need the title. If we truly realize the goals of best practices in [inclusive] education, we can all become teachers and get rid of specialized titles.*

This sentiment reflects an understanding posited throughout this book: An inclusion facilitator role is the “next-best thing” in the educational frontier, but the ultimate goal is for schools to include all students in age-appropriate general education settings naturally.

### **From Classroom Teacher to Facilitator of Supports Through Team Collaboration**

Stainback and Stainback (1996), Vandercook and York (1990), Thousand and Villa (2000), Weiner (2002), and others concurred that a major key to the success of inclusion is the involvement of students, teachers, specialists, administrators, parents, and community members, all working together in collaboration. Villa, Thousand, Paolucci-Whitcomb, and Nevin (1990) proposed that “the very process of engaging in collaborative teamwork can facilitate the invention of a new paradigm of collaboration. The process of collaboration requires continuous adaptation in order to make room for multiple perspectives” (p. 279).

The teaming process exists within schools through a variety of formal structures such as site-based management and decision-making teams, reflective practice groups or study circles, curriculum committees, grade-level teams combining special and general educators, and student-specific teams. Individuals with diverse knowledge, skills, and backgrounds come together to develop common district policies, norms of classroom practice, and student-specific solutions.

For Frank, the change from a classroom teacher to a facilitator of supports and team collaboration was not easy, but he realized that collaboration among families, schools, general education, and special education was essential.

“The concept of teaming and working together is critical to student success,” he stated emphatically. He continued, “[When we first started inclusion in our district] nobody had much information that was very helpful in terms of figuring it out in the classroom.” Frank also found the change to be difficult around the area of service delivery because many of the related-services providers took students out of the classroom (Giangreco, Reid, Dennis, & Edelman, 2000). Frank also faced issues surrounding technology during his

role transition—ranging from getting information about what was available to actually using it to support students with complex needs.

Sandy's educational background in elementary and special education did not include any crossover courses. She recalled,

*I didn't have any training in my undergraduate or master's program about working with other adults and the importance of collaboration, and I think that is huge. In my training you addressed the disability—you didn't accommodate to the learning environment, and you certainly didn't learn to work as a member of a team to address the opportunities and challenges of educating students with disabilities in general education.*

Elaine's transition has been a gradual one. She added,

*You can't go in the first year and make tremendous waves. You have to go in and make changes gradually. The challenge is to accept the reality of where the school is philosophically and set your sight on small successes to build on. It was important to build the team concept by getting to know people, their personalities, their mission, and what was important to them and then pulling them all together.*

## Advocacy and Schoolwide Leadership

Inclusion facilitators are teachers who emerged within the larger context of teaching for social justice, in which teaching is viewed as a moral profession requiring skills of change agency and leadership rather than those of a mere technician (Fullan, 1993). Elaine, Sandy, Catherine, and Frank all portray the characteristics of teacher, advocate, organizer, and leader in their roles. Dedication, experience, and self-taught skills have worked for them, but each acknowledged the need for preservice preparation and professional development that provide current and new educators with leadership and advocacy skills.

"I was nervous as hell when I first started because I didn't know if I could do it," Frank confessed, explaining that there were few workshops on inclusive education when he began working as a de facto inclusion facilitator.

*What I had in my favor is that I was really open and committed and hard working. I think what made me successful*

*in the role is that I was able to move people to support what I was doing.*

Frank listened and tried not to judge, made sure to tell people that he did not have all of the answers, and promised to work with them to help them figure things out. He continued, "Being hands-on in the classroom made a big difference. When I went to school to learn to be a teacher, there was nothing to prepare me for the role of inclusion facilitator."

Frank's biggest challenge during his role transition was the pervasive attitude that inclusion "can't work for all kids." He felt that he had to convince and show people that good education means supporting all kids in general education classes and maintaining high expectations, regardless of a student's unique characteristics. According to Frank, special education perpetuates the myth that some kids can benefit from being in the mainstream and some kids cannot. He observed,

*In many ways I felt like an advocate for the student and a teacher for the adults. Every part of the education system contradicts fully supporting all students and much of the time it [the decision about who was included and who wasn't] was pretty arbitrary. This was a constant challenge.*

Frank tackled the problem by developing his own leadership skills in order to advocate for necessary changes.

"I learned this role by the seat of my pants," Sandy concurred. She felt she was personally and professionally in the mindset to work as an inclusion facilitator well before there was an emphasis on including students with significant disabilities in general education. When she had worked in a self-contained program for preschoolers, there had been a child care center nearby for children without disabilities. Even then—27 years ago—she found herself asking why these children were separated when they could learn from one another. "What prepared me for this role was growing up in the field and being drawn to staff development that was geared toward information about inclusion." Sandy took advantage of as many professional development opportunities as possible, and similar to Frank, she had to forge her knowledge and experience of advocacy and leadership through self-directed professional development.

Although many inclusion facilitators would never describe themselves as leaders or advocates, Catherine observed, "In fact that is exactly what I need to be to facilitate positive outcomes for students with disabilities in general education classes." It is not

unusual for her to be in the position of justifying or advocating for the presence of a student with significant disabilities in ordinary routines. Catherine mused,

*I used to think this was not my role. But if it is not my role, then it becomes the primary responsibility of the parent. I have seen too many families work too hard to make sure their children with disabilities get a quality general education with supports. It shouldn't all be on the parents. This is my responsibility, too.*

### **Liaison Between School, Home, and the Community**

Strong relationships between schools, families, and the larger community offer opportunities for greater connectedness; an expanded understanding of resources available to support students, families, and schools; and an increased likelihood for successful transitions between school and home and ultimately to adult life. Relationships of mutual support are critical across organizations in community life and, according to Michael Peterson, Co-Founder of the Whole Schooling Consortium, “Our challenge is to create and support community—the common bond holding us together, which, in turn is supported and maintained by our relationships” (1996, p. 292). Because schools and families are essential to the fabric of community life, they must forge a partnership that consists of a shared understanding of what constitutes successful outcomes for all students and shared resources necessary to achieve those outcomes.

This concept implies that inclusion facilitators need to be knowledgeable about the variety of agencies affecting the lives of students and their families. Lourie, Katz-Levy, and Stroul (1996) described an approach called *unconditional care* that results in policies that seek to create an inclusive entrance into services and prevent discharge or exclusion from what is naturally available to students without disabilities. This approach also requires that students with disabilities receive access to specialized supports and services to meet their unique concerns. Although comprehensive systems of care, also known as the *wrap-around approach*, were initiated to respond to the needs of children and youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities, there is widespread agreement that this process benefits all children and their families with complex needs, regardless of their disability label. The wrap-around systems of care approach acknowledges that there are many service providers in the

lives of some families, and thus all service providers need to work collaboratively to address the family's needs within their home, neighborhood school, and local community.

Unfortunately, recognition of the importance of wrap-around services together with the skills to bring services to the family has not traditionally been taught in preservice educational or professional development programs. Catherine, for example, wished she had learned more about community resources so that she could better support families beyond the school day. She lamented, "It would have been good to have a better understanding of how to access these resources to solve the challenges that students and families face at home that end up impacting their time at school."

Elaine regretted that she wasn't trained to work with parents to understand what is important to them or how to negotiate win-win solutions between the parents and the school. Some parents, she said, want their children to learn to read and write and support their inclusion in general education core curriculum, but others appear to value social relationships for their children above all else. Still others are concerned with having their children learn basic functional skills and do not see the importance of having their children attend academic classes such as social studies and science. She recalled,

*In the beginning, parents looked at me like I had two heads when we stated that there was value to some of the [general] education classes that they might not have considered before. We needed to walk them through and show them how in the context of the class students could be working on functional skills and still get the benefit of [general] classes.*

Catherine described her experiences as a liaison to illustrate how important home and community supports are to educational outcomes. She revealed, "So often out-of-district placements happen when there are [challenging] issues at home. Schools seem to be unable or unwilling to be flexible and to get involved to be a change agent around these issues." She noted that it is often difficult for students who require significant physical and/or behavioral supports to receive those supports at home when a family is not able to provide them. Without these accommodations provided at home, Catherine said, it has also been difficult to ensure these students' success at school. Her role as a liaison requires that she be aware of what resources exist in the community and assume responsibility for coordinating these resources.

Catherine offered one example:

*A student I support received counseling services, special education services, speech-language [services], and hearing services at school. Her parents also took her to a local clinic in which she received yet another round of therapy. There was no coordination between school and home community services and, unbeknownst to everyone, the school and clinic were working on different goals! As the liaison, I was able to bring this to everyone's attention. Once the family understood that the school was providing those services throughout the course of the day, they were comfortable dropping the after-school therapy and focusing on getting their daughter included in age-appropriate extracurricular activities.*

In order to create a wrap-around system of care that coordinates consistent and effective services, an inclusion facilitator's role has evolved to include the responsibility of acting as a liaison between the school, home, and community. Chapter 7 describes in detail an inclusion facilitator's role as an information and community resource broker.

## Creating Sustainability

The interviewees provided many recommendations about what it takes to sustain inclusive learning environments. According to Elaine, Sandy, Catherine, and Frank, maintaining an inclusive learning environment requires

- Teachers who are flexible, innovative, and willing to put inclusive ideas into practice
- Teachers who invite inclusion facilitators to share their grade-level planning time and welcome inclusion facilitators and others into their classrooms
- Teachers who see all of the students in their class as their students and not merely visitors
- Teachers and other team members who sustain their own energy and commitment to avoid burnout
- Schools that offer professional development that supports inclusive strategies
- Schools that expect teachers to work as a team and to maintain high expectations for all students

- Schools that emphasize building the trust level among students, parents, and all team members, including the principal and assistant principal

## SUSTAINING THE INCLUSION FACILITATOR'S ENERGY AND COMMITMENT BY CELEBRATING SUCCESS

Although the role evolution for inclusion facilitators has not always been easy, celebrating successes is a positive way to maintain one's energy and commitment. Catherine, Elaine, Sandy, and Frank all had stories of celebration that inspire and illustrate their true dedication to inclusive schools.

Catherine revels in the little successes rather than focusing on what has not worked so well. For one of her students with significant disabilities, her team has been able to predict potential challenges and clear expectations ahead of time so that behavioral crises do not occur. As a result of Catherine's leadership, this student has more friends and participates more actively in classroom activities. Another of her students, who has a label of autism spectrum disorder, used to choose picture books to look at rather than books with text to read. Catherine suggested that the paraprofessional and teacher preview the class books and identify questions about the plot and characters that would pique the student's interest. Now, this student is reading text that is grade level and above. Catherine hypothesized,

*He needed a start and a finish to the chapter book, and the comprehension questions gave him a structure and the motivation to engage in reading. People never expected that he could do this, but we figured out what makes him click as a reader, and people could see that he is smart and capable. Before we tried this strategy, no one was sure what he was getting out of it.*

Elaine considers the milestones of graduation and the completion of driver's education—activities that some thought particular students would either never have as a goal or be able to achieve—as markers of success. One student who experienced significant behavioral and cognitive disabilities moved into Elaine's former school district from an out-of-state school. In his old school, he was in a self-contained classroom and spent the day working on supposedly functional skills such as sorting, identifying colors, and counting. Elaine recalled with pride,



*He is now in tenth grade, attending all general education classes, and being provided with paraprofessional support. He is working on gaining the credits required to graduate. His parents never thought they would see that day, and the whole school community is recognizing and learning from the success. This was a kid who was typically sent home from school because of his behaviors. I get misty eyed when I think of him.*

Frank celebrated the close relationships that developed among peers, as well as the creation of teams including students, families, and teachers who shared the same goals. His work with one student led to that student's involvement in the school's booster club and Key Club as well as a summer job alongside another classmate who did not have disabilities. "It made it feel as though you could accomplish anything!" Frank marveled.

Frank also shared the story of Molly's inclusion into a fifth-grade classroom as one of his most challenging, yet satisfying, examples of successful inclusion.

### Molly's Story

When Frank met Molly and her parents, she was a resident of a pediatric nursing home, having been placed there by the school district when she was 3 years old. When Molly was approaching her tenth birthday, she and the other students who lived at the facility spent their school day in a small educational program located at the site, engaged in personal care routines, therapy, and preschool activities.

In his role as the elementary school inclusion facilitator, Frank visited Molly a few times a year to ensure that her IEP was being implemented as written, to check on her progress, and to participate in end-of-year program review meetings. He had become convinced that her local school could provide an appropriate and rich education for Molly, and he made it a personal goal to return her to the district. He knew that even if Molly stayed in the pediatric nursing home, he would be busy facilitating successful inclusion for the other seven students on his caseload. Yet, each time he visited her, he knew that he had to advocate for her return as well.

For almost 2 years, Frank broached the idea of moving Molly back to the district with her parents, the district's special education director, and the principal of Molly's neighborhood school, but none of them believed the idea was feasible. Rather than criticize them for their difference of

opinion, he acknowledged their concerns and worked to address each and every one in a respectful way.

Then, during Molly's fourth-grade year, the opportunity arose for Frank's school district to be part of the IOD's Statewide Systems Change Project that was focused on building local capacity to educate students with significant disabilities in their home schools. He asked Molly's parents, a team of people from her school, and the family support coordinator from the local developmental service agency if they would like to attend a weeklong summer institute sponsored by the project and then participate in a year's worth of training and technical assistance to help plan Molly's successful transition. The team agreed, as long as members could have the option of making the final decision about Molly's educational program and placement based on her individual needs. Frank was optimistic that everyone's concerns could be addressed, and he welcomed the challenge.

The team did attend the summer institute and left sharing Frank's passion about inclusive education. Although members still had many concerns and questions that needed to be resolved before they would be ready to bring Molly back to the district, their attitude had shifted from "why?" to "how?"

Following the summer institute, Frank and Molly's team met to develop a 12-month plan for Molly's transition that included numerous training opportunities for school staff, Molly's team members, and her future classmates. The team's goal was for Molly to enter fifth grade the following school year. The team decided to visit Molly at the facility, review her IEP, and see how her educational goals and health concerns were being met.

On the way home from the visit, their van buzzed with conversation. The team was unimpressed by the content of Molly's educational program. Even though they weren't really sure about Molly's capacity to learn, they felt sure that their fifth-grade curriculum and classroom would provide a much richer learning environment in which Molly could reach her potential.

Frank was convinced that Molly had greater abilities than she was able to demonstrate. She didn't have a way to communicate but clearly demonstrated an interest in the people and activities around her. Frank remarked that he wouldn't like anyone to try to guess how smart he was if he could not move or speak, and he vowed that he would never make any predictions about what Molly could or could not learn.

Molly's health concerns were substantial and the school, Molly's parents, and team wanted to ensure Molly's safe return to the district by setting standards for her health support. The team determined that Molly

would need the services of a paraprofessional with training in cardiopulmonary resuscitation, catheter maintenance, suctioning, and feeding Molly through her gastrointestinal tube. The team's goal was to hire an experienced special education paraprofessional who had Certified Nursing Assistant licensure. Together with the school nurse and occupational therapist, Frank wrote a job description for this person and began interviews about 3 months before the end of that school year.

Frank also worked extensively with Molly's parents and the local developmental service agency to plan for the home supports Molly would need. New Hampshire had recently approved a Medicaid waiver program to provide in-home supports for children with significant health care concerns that was not tied to family income. The family determined that there were architectural barriers that would have to be addressed and that specialized medical equipment and the services of a personal care attendant for several hours of the day were needed to ensure Molly's safety and their family's overall stability. Frank was instrumental in helping the family negotiate the paperwork and regulatory hurdles to obtain those services.

Once the team developed a detailed health and safety plan, it met regularly to discuss how Molly might participate in the fifth-grade classroom and curriculum. Frank spent many hours observing in the fifth-grade class, noting the room's physical layout, the teacher's instructional methods, and the children's interactions. Because Frank had worked with children with significant disabilities for many years, he had developed a file drawer full of lesson plans and creative projects for other students, and the team slowly began to have a vision of how Molly could participate in typical fifth-grade lessons at the same time she was learning the skills on her IEP.

Frank knew Molly's communication barriers would make it difficult to include her in the academic life of the classroom and arranged for her to be assessed by an augmentative communication team from the state's assistive technology center. The team determined that a single-switch communication device would give Molly a way to participate in lessons and that the process of expanding her communication abilities would be a long-term goal.

Every time Frank met with Molly's prospective team, one member or another raised new concerns that had to be addressed. Frank's reassuring manner, his ability to coach the team to voice its concerns, and his years of experience built a real sense of trust within the team. Frank knew that this effort would be successful only if the team was an effective working group, so he developed close relationships with each team member in school and through occasional end-of-the-week get-togethers.

Assisted by Molly's mother, Frank conducted two miniworkshops for the outgoing fourth-grade students because he knew that they would be key in accepting Molly as a valued member of social life in the classroom and school community. Molly's mom shared a scrapbook about Molly with the students. Frank talked openly about her disabilities, but emphasized what Molly and the other students had in common. Toward the end of the school year, the classroom teacher had the students write short notes to Molly telling her all about themselves and their school.

Frank was careful to create a picture of Molly that emphasized her gifts and personality without asking for the students' pity. He knew that some students would take on the role of Molly's helpers, but he talked honestly with them about the need for Molly to feel as if she had something to offer them as well.

As the time for Molly's transition grew nearer, Frank coordinated a half-day visit to the school. Rather than making the event a formal occasion, he and the classroom teacher picked a day during the last month of school when the annual school fair was taking place. Frank, Molly, and her mom sat at a picnic table and introduced Molly to the many children who shyly approached them to find out about the girl whom they had come to know through an occasional videotape or letter.

The transition planning process did not always go as planned. When the fifth-grade teacher who had been part of the planning process announced that she would be going on maternity leave for the first 3 months of the following school year, Frank and the principal worked together to identify another fifth-grade teacher in the building who was open to having Molly in his or her classroom. At first, this change in plans seemed to present an almost insurmountable barrier as the team had invested so much energy in the first teacher. When the team found out that the new teacher had just recently attended a conference on multiple intelligences and was planning to design several multiple intelligences-based units, they felt as if the unplanned change might have unexpected benefits for Molly (Armstrong, 2000).

This description of Molly's transition planning makes it appear as if everything went smoothly, the team members never had a disagreement, and that even the difficulties worked themselves out magically. The reality is far from that. But Frank's disposition and unshakable belief in inclusion provided a sense of steady leadership to the team so that the inevitable problems that arose were addressed in an honest and systematic way. Frank is a good example of the type of professional who holds the beliefs and has the disposition to be a successful inclusion facilitator (see Table 1.1).

**Table 1.1.** Beliefs and personality traits of successful inclusion facilitators

Beliefs	Personality traits
Families are central to children's lives.	Committed
Good teaching is good teaching.	Flexible and open-minded
Every person has inherent value.	Collaborative
Every person has competence.	Respectful of others' viewpoints
Diversity enhances community.	Creative
	Friendly
	Optimistic

What about Molly? Her first year in public school was marked by joyous occasions, such as her participation in the holiday concert and her emerging literacy skills. There were also some frustrating moments when people were unsure of what she was communicating or when IEP team meetings were cancelled due to reasons beyond the members' control. But all in all, Molly seemed happy, she was using her communication device, her parents were more optimistic about Molly's future than they had ever been before, and the school moved one step closer to being a true, inclusive community of learners.

## CONCLUSION

Although the job title of inclusion facilitator is meant to describe a laudable goal—supporting all students to be successful in the general education classroom and school community—the word *inclusion* has taken on a negative connotation for some people. Language has the power to unite or divide. It can move people forward or backward in the effort to achieve promising practices for students with disabilities. Perhaps the job title of inclusion facilitator is just the “next-best thing,” and what really matters most is that all educators promote a vision of an inclusive and just society, hold high expectations for every student, and use effective teaching strategies that result in positive academic and relational outcomes for all students, including those with significant disabilities.

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