

## Email Interview with Dr. Charissa Reardon (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Parkland High School Learning Support Teacher)

1. *From your experience as a special education teacher, what are some of the most effective strategies for creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment for students with disabilities?*

The unfortunate truth is that we are still far from an inclusive and supportive learning environment for students with disabilities. Many factors contribute to ableism. Emily Ladau, a celebrated disability rights advocate, writer, and speaker, stated in her book, *Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to Be an Ally*, that “ableism is the attitude, actions, and circumstances that devalue people because they are disabled or perceived as having a disability (70).” Prior to Ladau’s work, Thomas Hehir dedicated his life’s work to furthering disability rights. He defined ableism as pervasive discrimination and oppression that many people with disabilities experience in society(Hehir, 15) . Parents, educators, and administrators tend to be unaware of how their actions or beliefs support ableism and promote exclusion. Far too many Life Skills students are educated solely in exclusive environments due to the belief that they would be disruptive to the general education classroom or require too much of the educator’s attention. This does not have to be the case.

The classroom teacher’s attitude toward the concept of rightful presence, which expands the notion of inclusion, is the most effective and foundational component of creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Rightful presence is a concept developed by Calabrese Barton and Tan in 2020. It is based on ‘making present’ those students who have been historically missing from the general education classroom. They argued that teachers are the gatekeepers to critical skills that are the inherent right of all students. The ability of the students to be exposed to these academic skills and critical learning is crucial. Inclusion can only truly happen if the educators believe that each child has the right not only to be present in their class, but they have unique abilities to learn and contribute to their classroom environments. Now, this can seem to be a lofty idea and it can be quite intimidating to educators. This is why classrooms must be structured to have teams of teachers and/or support staff, ideally, where one educator may have stronger skills with the subject matter and the other a better understanding of different learning styles. Ideally, these roles would be fluid. In our country, we honor education by making it compulsory for all children 16 and younger, no matter what their race, creed, economic level, or ability. It is truly a noble call and one that needs to be safeguarded.

In the Parkland School District, we have utilized a co-teaching model for over 15 years. We were one of the first districts in this area to implement it. Our district committed to the process by sending general education and special education teachers to conferences to learn about the different methods. We also had monthly planning time. It was a solid commitment, and it has been successful. This has served students at the college prep and CEW levels the most. There is a lot more that needs to be done so our students with specific learning needs are in more classes, especially electives. Several

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organizations at the state and federal level help to train school systems, usually in the K-8 setting, in the rightful presence and inclusive practices. It tends to center around utilizing technology most effectively and having at least two adults in classrooms with a manageable number of students. One organization in particular that has successfully created an equitable and inclusive learning environment is SWiFT Education Center. They train schools on a 10-pronged approach for an equity-based Multi-Tiered System of Support education. This organization is or has been federally funded through the Department of Education. I hope that it remains an important program in the eyes of those in charge of making funding decisions.

2. *The theme for National History Day this year is 'Rights and Responsibilities.' In your view, what responsibilities do educators, schools, and students have in ensuring that every student—regardless of ability—has access to quality education?*

If you gathered a group of 20 or more educators into a room and asked them to discuss the purpose of education, the responses would have multiple perspectives. However, the two most debated reasons for education are individual empowerment and societal advancement. In our country, another important reason for education is that it is essential for a working, thriving democracy. This question makes for lively debate and deep division.

For me, the answer is pretty clear: if we value human life, then we have to ensure that each person is treated with dignity and care. Education is the one service that helps any individual improve his/her life's circumstances. Education is also nearly impossible to lose once you obtain it. So, it makes sense to treat learning as an equitable and accessible practice and to view it as an investment. So why do we continue to have barriers to education? Education has always been political and weaponized. As groups of marginalized people fight for their right to quality education, disability advocates have been the fiercest and most vocal since their work has been a representation of their life. But not all advocates are disabled; there have been some amazing able-bodied allies who have helped to break many educational barriers. The late Harvard professor, [Thomas Hehir](#), dedicated his career to eliminating ableism in classrooms and educational policy. He was able to define and demonstrate the benefits of quality education for all students, regardless of their ability levels of the students. The University of Kansas continued the work to enhance the learning of all students through Universal Design. They developed the [SWiFT](#) (Schoolwide Integration Framework and Transformation) Education Centers. Through their work and research, SWiFT has successfully demonstrated how Universal Design, technology, and schoolwide behavior plans increase all student achievement.

Education is a great equalizer. It is a right and a responsibility. All educators, administrators, and staff need to participate in an environment that affords all students the opportunity to discover themselves. At times, students become so disengaged that it is difficult to motivate them to pursue an education. Yet we still strive to help students

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succeed. However, when a child has the desire to learn and be a part of the school system but may not have the academic level of general education students, it is a travesty when educators block access to learning. We can do serious damage to the belief system of the young people in our charge. We must always strive to see who is standing or sitting in front of us and to show perseverance in helping them achieve.

3. *You have dedicated your career to helping students develop study skills and strategies for academic success. How can individualized learning plans and accommodations empower students with disabilities to reach their full potential?*

In 1961, John F. Kennedy stated, *“Let us think of education as the means of developing our greatest abilities because in each of us, there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone and for our nation.”* I am sharing this quote with you because it sums up the purpose of a student’s educational plan. If educators remain focused on the concept of rightful presence, then we assume that all students have strengths and weaknesses that guide them toward their life’s purpose. As educators, we want to create a space where we can draw out the curiosities of our students, which serves as intrinsic motivation. When a student within the IEP program turns 14 years old, the school system is mandated to start discussing transition services. These services are the support each student has access to, so they can become prepared for their future goals. Post-secondary goals of the student drive the IEP and its specially designed instruction at the high school level. These goals can and typically are academic, but they can also be behavioral, organizational, or employment goals. During this time, students start attending their IEP meeting as a safeguard for their role in determining their future. Self-determination skills are essential for all students, but students with intellectual disabilities or other learning differences tend not to have opportunities to learn through trial and error who they are and what kind of lifestyle suits them best. Many times, they tend to be told what their life will become rather than decide for themselves or guided by their family. Their coursework and job placements tend to be dictated by where the resources are rather than where with desires or strengths lead them. Learning support teachers are able to connect students and family members to outside agencies to further help them reach their goals. The IEP becomes the legal document to help students reach their goals.

4. *What advice would you give to future educators, policymakers, or student advocates about supporting the rights of students with disabilities in the classroom?*

As an educator we have to have a strong sense of purpose and a clear focus as to why we have decided to dedicate our career as a special education teacher. One’s motivation determines how effective we will be for the students in our charge. Many disability advocates are people who have disabilities themselves. It is important that we read their work and know their stories. We also need to understand that parents are also their child’s biggest advocate. They have the most vested interest in the child’s

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education. We tend to become frustrated with parents who are active in their child's education. But as an educator, I recommend embracing them as the leader of the IEP team. It is important to build trusting relationships so when difficult discussion concerning services and future plans arise, parents know that we have their child's best interest at heart. We also have to understand that parents know their children much better than we ever will. I have witness amazing accomplishments due to the support and care of family members. I have had students obtain master's degree when we have educated them in self-contained English classes for most of their high school years. If we cannot be a pathway for our students at the very least do not be a brick wall.

We all must SEE/HEAR each child regardless of if they are verbal or nonverbal. We must see the humanity in all people, or we set up scenarios where abuse can take hold. Special education settings have been wrought with these issues for centuries. It has been the very impetus for inclusion movement.

Lastly, I would also like to ask all of us this question: Who gets to determine what is considered normal? When I have worked with adults and students who have more involved disabilities, I have been amazed at how much I have learned from them. I have learned many things but some of the ones that have touch me the most would be the following: How to show kindness, How to enjoy the present moment, and How to have complete trust and good will in others. All these situations I would argue are needed in our world, maybe even more than the latest AI advancement.

5. *How can students like me contribute to raising awareness and advocating for inclusive education in our own schools and communities?*

We tend to have isolated events like Inclusion Week where we celebrate the students in the Life Skills curriculum. General education students will snap pictures with Life Skills students but it never expands beyond the superficial. Can students open their lunch table for Life Skills students to sit with you? Can you walk down the hallway daily and say hi while making eye contact? Can you stop and make small talk to learn about the student who, for the most part, walk in the hallways as invisible.

Modeling understanding and acceptance helps to normalize rightful presence. Having students with diverse learning styles or needs in your classroom does not detract from anyone's education- it enhances it. Can you work on your own biases and ableism to accept a student with autism who may have stimming behaviors? Could you cultivate empathy as not just seeing it as stimming but as a manifestation of possible anxiety and then relate to those feelings within yourself? Can we identify rather than judge, so we truly create an environment conducive for all to learn and feel safe? It is a tall order because our society values competition and cut-throat achievement. But maybe the students in the Life Skills classroom have the secret to a happy and fulfilling life. Maybe we all can truly learn from one another.