

Mullen: Welcome to the EXPLORING THE CORE PODCAST, where we delve into the elements that make up our education system and learn more about how that system can improve for the benefit of all students in schools today.

I'm Greg Mullen and in this episode I'll be talking about concepts of Academic Inclusion and Behavioral Coaching, to highlight the impact a developmental mindset can have on building an inclusive environment in a general education classroom.

I'll also be talking to Meg Bristow, a Special Education Coordinator out of Santa Ana, California, about her thoughts on the topic of inclusion in schools.

Thank you for listening, I hope you enjoy the show.

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I'd like to start this episode by mentioning the book I published through Corwin Press in December 2019. It's called *Creating a Self-Directed Learning Environment: Standards-Based and Social-Emotional Learning* and I want to ensure you that there's a good reason for mentioning my book because each of the episodes in this podcast has focused on topics related to either Standards-Based Grading or Social-Emotional Learning.

Well, in today's episode, I'm focusing on how a standards-based and social-emotional approach to education, combined with a Developmental Mindset, addressing the cognitive and psychosocial development of students, can take intuitive efforts for academic and behavioral inclusion in some classrooms and turn it into intentional efforts in all classrooms.

In my classroom, I always had at least one or two students with an IEP, or Individualized Educational Program. This meant that a student and their parent or guardian met with their teachers, administrator, special education coordinator, as well as any other service provider relevant to the student's needs, and discussed what challenges the student is facing and how certain accommodations or modifications will help ensure that student has opportunities to learn that meet their needs. At the start of a school year, I would typically receive a binder with these students' IEP information and pull out the aspects of each IEP that directly impact my classroom. These sometimes included things as simple as seating arrangements and particular check-for-understanding strategies or extra processing time, but sometimes they would include things like needing to arrange in advance a separate high-stakes testing environment. I'm not mentioning the possible reasons or rationale for why any of these accommodations were necessary because I've learned that there's not always a causation of a student need and a particular accommodation - every individual student is different and an accommodation that works for one kiddo may not work the same for another. What I liked about having one or two students with an IEP meant I always had a basis for how I needed to approach my classroom management for the year. I actually looked forward to those documents for this reason because it meant that I didn't have to spend the first few weeks figuring out what works for this student or that student. In fact, I would spend those first few weeks exercising my awareness of how those

accommodations would not only benefit those particular students but how they might also benefit all of the other students in my classroom.

You see, something I mention in my book is what I call a Developmental Mindset. This is an awareness that a classroom full of students around the same age may actually be working through a wide range of certain social, emotional, and even cognitive and psychosocial stages of human development. I would be offering my students a disservice if I treated them all according to a particular average of all of those developmental stages and set my expectations based on that average, because none of them would ever fall precisely on that average line. In fact, looking at that “best line of fit” for the developmental scatter plot of my students was mainly to keep my own sanity. It had always seemed impossible to think that I could address every students’ needs all the time. It took a few years before I realized how wrong I was.

One of my favorite days of the school year became the first day of school. It wasn’t because everybody was on their “best behavior”. It was because that initial state in which students would enter my classroom allowed me to observe how they chose to find their seat - maybe it was with a friend, or perhaps a student would anxiously find their seat away from others, or walk confidently to the front-center of available seats and begin unpacking their things in what they have clearly presumed to be the best seat in the house. What I came to realize is that it wasn’t just what seat they were selecting as much as *how* they chose their seat which illuminated for me their own personal and social wants and needs. It created an informal set of base data that I would gauge over that first week as each student began to assimilate to my particular classroom environment.

Now, something I often reflect on is the old adage, *kids will be kids*, and how it’s not always the case for all students. Such absolutes will feed certain stereotypes and it’s important to recognize that some students will occasionally model that adage and want only to socialize and make friends all year long with little interest in what you have to say. What I consider now is that there is likely a reason why this is their prime directive beyond just, “oh, kids don’t want to learn, they only want to play.” I disagree. Yes, they do want to play as much as I want to play as a grown-up but I’ve observed students so hyper-focused on academic success that they’ll dismiss the need to develop certain social skills to the point where academic status eventually takes over their desire to develop any concepts not on a high-stakes academic assessment. Concepts such as empathy, communication, conflict resolution - any instruction or guidance in such non-graded concepts are seen as a waste of time and not worth exploring. I know it sounds unbelievable, in a very literal sense, and I wouldn’t believe it either if I hadn’t experienced such extreme examples of students in my own classroom over the years; but the fact is that pushing the average stereotype of any particular age or grade level on an individual student or group of students might not seem to be doing any harm and may actually make it easier to manage a group of young humans, but I argue that the problems teachers face in secondary schools and beyond are rooted in how we are managing the development of humans in our classrooms at all levels.

The need for an inclusive classroom environment, in my opinion, begins with a developmental mindset that looks at how each individual student is developing, considers both the general and specific challenges they are facing, and considers how a particular classroom environment may be adapted to account for the group dynamics of a particular teacher and their students. It's my humble opinion that every student would benefit from an Individualized Educational Program, but I'm well aware of the challenges in making that happen in the current state of today's education system.

So what can be done? Where can we start?

I believe there are two things that can be considered as we dive into creating an inclusive environment.

First, I believe it's important to recognize that we're talking about working with individuals within a classroom full of peers. You may have heard someone say in the past how a person can't seem to see the forest for the trees. In the case of the classroom teacher, I've found it's quite the opposite. As educators, we want our forest of trees to have order, organization, clarity, calmness - productive student learning in a controlled state. Unfortunately, we're not dealing with an orchard of trees programmed to produce all the same fruit. Our rows of student desks may resemble the desire for such order and control of student learning because we see that as our role - to produce and deliver student learning. I've had teachers tell me that it's our job to teach the student, but I disagree with that statement. I've said in a prior episode and I'll say it again here - student learning is **not my job as the teacher**, that is the job of the student. When student learning is the responsibility of the teacher, that learning is filtered through expectations set for all students in a classroom and exceptions made for those few that may need them; unfortunately, this is the very perspective that makes it increasingly improbable to create a fully inclusive learning environment. When a teacher's expectations are the same for all students across the board based on generalized average developmental expectations, students that learn best in ways that are too far removed from that set of generalized age-based expectations will serve as a limiting boundary for creating an inclusive environment.

Second, I believe inclusion is directly related to creating a self-directed learning environment and that there are behaviors both general and specific that teachers must coach early in a child's life that will serve them in developing a self-directed mindset. I do believe it is best to begin at the elementary levels because that's when you're most likely to have one set of students all day long. In middle and high school, I tend to suggest starting with a particular set of students who are maybe challenging the general behavior expectations across various classrooms regardless of environment - this is something I discuss in the second part of Chapter Five in my book. But let's focus now on elementary schools and how Behavioral Coaching and Intervention can have an impact on creating an academically inclusive environment.

Let's first look at how a student with an IEP can be coached in academics through the use of Standards-Based Grading and a Developmental Mindset. Let's consider a student identified as

being two years behind in math based on district and state assessment results and having no severe learning disorders. Building conceptual understanding of fractions has been identified as a specific goal for this student and this skill set has been identified as the highest need according to current grade level standards. Typically, classroom instruction is differentiated within the planned lessons, assignments are adjusted to account for any needed back-filling, and students are assigned general small-group or one-on-one after-school tutoring once or twice a week. That's fine.

I would suggest starting by looking at the related standards two years prior to this student's assigned grade level. In this case, I'm going to need to look at the Geometry standards in second grade because I know that in second grade this student was taught how to reason with shapes, breaking circles and rectangles into two, three, and four equal shares. In fact, I know this because I built an app for this purpose that shows how standards connect across grade levels (you can find the app on GooglePlay or the Appstore). Now when I engage students with standards this far back, I am typically able to access and develop a positive relationship through games and activities that highlight what this student is able to do. This is part of the student's combined cognitive and psychosocial developmental process which not only allows me to access their prior knowledge but also celebrate the language necessary to explain the concepts behind what they already know. This also creates opportunities to work on social and emotional competencies, but this example is focused on academic growth. The biggest challenge for this approach is the time that it takes and the resources and staffing needed to make sure that this time for games and one-on-one explanations can be consistently guaranteed for this student.

Now let's look at a second example with a student whose IEP has listed a behavior goal related to this student's executive functioning skills. This time we'll look at how this student can be coached in behavior through the use of Social-Emotional Learning and a Developmental Mindset. Let's consider a student diagnosed with moderate ADHD with symptoms identified on a semi-weekly or daily basis - enough to put this student behind in their academics but also find themselves in whatever detention-style program their school has in place.

Now, here, I'll go down the list of SEL Competencies I describe in my book which are rooted in research by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, or CASEL.

This student has a positive sense of self with confidence in their abilities and well aware of their emotions, though the challenge seems to be exercising specific coping skills when emotions become extreme. This plays into their competencies for social-awareness and relationships as their empathy wanes when they become emotional, their capacity for moderating the ability to exercise healthy communication skills becomes limited, and they seem to become unable to access resolution strategies for different conflicts in various situations. Their societal awareness of responsibility to their community is fine and they have a good sense of what is societally appropriate in their community at school, at home, and on the playground, when boundaries and limits are consistent.

This social and emotional approach to identifying a student's strengths allows me to highlight which competencies I will need to incorporate into my classroom management. I'll need to teach all of my students the coping mechanisms that would benefit this particular student and the most common emotions that create the most frequent obstacles. This not only helps this student increase their capacity for self-regulation skills but also teaches all students to recognize and communicate with a student now or in the future who may need to access this kind of emotional coping strategy - all without embarrassing the one student I'm legally required to offer such strategies.

Sometimes when I would walk into my own classroom, I would reflect on how much of the classroom is in my control and how much is in the hands of my students. If I wholly intend to prepare my students to be self-directed outside of my classroom, I have to develop the skill sets that not only prepare them for their own personal and professional success but to recognize the need for their peers in communities other than their own to access *their own* personal and professional success. The concept of academic and behavioral inclusion is not one that demands teachers comply with legal requirements under threat of punishment or reprimand and it's an unfortunate necessary aspect of this important change to our system of education, but the concept of inclusion in school classrooms is to create environments in which our students *learn how to learn* - side by side - with all humans as part of a larger community, to build a societal perspective that is larger than their own friends and family, to increase their capacity for empathetic reasoning, and exit the K-12 school system prepared to enter universities, corporations, government agencies, and take with them this developmental mindset as they raise their families and become *involved* in their own children's education in the future. This vision is possible and it starts with us in schools today.

Now I'd like to take a step back and share a phone interview I had with Meg Bristow, a past colleague of mine and special education coordinator, an incredibly patient educator, and just a wonderful human being. I hope you enjoy our chat and I thank you for listening to the program.

**[Interview: Meg Bristow]**

Mullen: My interview today is with Meg Bristow who has worked in Special Education for the last fifteen years as a paraprofessional, case manager and program developer for students with autism, and has spent the past several years as a special education coordinator in Santa Ana, California. Mrs. Bristow, thank you for taking the time to speak with me today.

Bristow: Of course, happy to be here.

Mullen: Now, for the listeners it may be prudent to mention that I have had the distinct pleasure of working with you. I was a classroom teacher while you were the special education coordinator and it's one of the reasons I'm so excited to speak with you. It's not only because we were colleagues, because the campus was unique that it serves PreK all the way through High School, but I'm excited particularly because of the positive way I've seen you build professional

relationships with so many colleagues of different professional backgrounds. What I'm portraying and your role - does that sound accurate?

Bristow: Um, yea, absolutely. I work with all sorts of people from supervised paraprofessionals and special education teachers and school psychologists, speech pathologists, and all sorts of service providers and also spend a lot of time with general education teachers and administrators - so, everybody. [Laughter] Everybody.

Mullen: And that's what's really quite amazing to me is the interconnected role you play and the responsibilities you share with so many different professionals in a school. Can you talk a bit about the nature of your role and the importance of communication styles, perhaps in context of what you feel has worked well for you so far.

Bristow: Sure, I guess the nature of my role - there's a couple of components. The compliance component which is so huge in special education, but then there's more importantly the student side of things and making sure that what we're doing isn't just in compliance but it is also meeting students' needs, and so trying to figure out what works and what doesn't work and that takes a team approach. It's not just one single person that's going to make it work for a kid. So we really have to, or in my role, I really have to work with all sorts of different individuals from kindergarten teachers to calculus teachers to try and figure out what their comfort level is with special education and what their background is and then kind of differentiating my approach with that adult to figure out how to make that student successful in their classroom. I don't consider myself the expert, I consider us all experts, and so kind of figuring out what teachers already know about kids and what they're bringing into the classroom that we can utilize to support different students - so that's kind of fun. That creativity is really what I love about this job.

Mullen: And I'm so lucky that I've been able to see that in action, especially with your approach to communication with so many; and it being a critical component not just with how you work with your colleagues but also in how you serve the students with special needs. What impact do you feel your communication style or perspective or approach has on how your team addresses the students you're serving in the classrooms?

Bristow: I think something that's really effective for me is, just, I'm a very calm person so taking a calm approach and not looking at any problem as the end of the world but just something new we have to tackle. So taking that approach when I'm listening to teachers sharing their concerns about this kid doing this, or this kid, you know, this thing is happening in my classroom, and trying to really listen, I think, first and take it all in and then figure out, instead of just "here's the solution" and handing it to them, and really working together as a team to kind of figure it out. Because what works in one classroom one year with one student isn't always going to work the same the next year - or even the next day. So I think just modeling that and then when we work with our students directly keeping that in mind of, you know, we're not going to tackle the world today but we can tackle today, today, and kind of go from there.

Mullen: That's a really tough idea for a lot of people, really recognizing how you want your colleagues to work with their students is how you need to work with your colleagues. That's really important. Now there is something I really want to make sure I have enough time to talk to you about today and really get a chance to dig in. It's the topic of Inclusion. It's something that those in special education and administration are quite familiar with and, for me, it's a topic I see as a blending of both general and special education. You know, I mention it in my book, but I feel the first thing I want to do here is get your take on what inclusion means especially in context of your work.

Bristow: Absolutely. I think from a special education perspective, when you're looking like there's a legal side of things again special education is founded in legal mandates but the idea that students have to be educated in the least restrictive environment so meeting with their peers as much as possible - so that's the law, and then there's the practice side of it. So I think the practice I think is obviously the hardest part in trying to figure out what inclusion means. I mean, to me, it's less of a placement option and more of just a belief that everyone belongs regardless of their perceived need or ability. So not thinking, not having the mindset, that this kid's too low to be in my class, or he can't read so he can't be in history, things like that. It's the idea that everyone does belong and can contribute maybe in different ways. That's my philosophy behind inclusion and when you think about things through that lens I think it helps to have a better perspective when you're looking at these kids and trying to think how can they contribute in my classroom and how can they be part of the community.

Mullen: It's a fantastic philosophy, really relying on a vision and a belief to structure the practices that you are implementing. I'm curious - are there any particular practices, approaches, or strategies that you generally offer your general education teachers to help them see that inclusion and blend it into their own practice?

Bristow: I think the most helpful thing is - I hear a lot of "he can't", "she can't", when they're referring to things that are an expectation for all of the class. So when I'm hearing that I try to reframe that conversation and look at what they can do. A lot of students have really spotted skills so there are things they can do really well, so like sure they can't independently write an essay but they're a really good artist so how can we incorporate their skills into this lesson and maybe not meet all of the standard but how can we make sure that they're working towards some of the standards or what their IEP team feels is the most appropriate thing. How we can include them versus what they can't do - we already know what they can't do, but what can they do.

Mullen: That's a fantastic starting point. I imagine that's quite difficult for teachers that are used to saying "he can't", "she can't". Now this is going to be a tough question, and I apologize, but I feel it's meaningful as schools continue to evolve towards an inclusive learning environment, but what are some of the more common obstacles that you've found in your years of service besides that little bit of pushback you get when teachers are seeing special education students

come into their classrooms; but some of the more common obstacles that you've found in your years of being at schools that have hindered a school's efforts for inclusion in classrooms.

Bristow: Not a hard question, actually - it's behavior. That's the one thing they have a hard time wrapping their heads around, it's students' behavior. If a student is compliant but well below grade level, there's not a lot of pushback. We can accommodate kids who are compliant or easy to get along with or are able to make friends easily; it's the students who are making noises or running out of the classroom or having violent-type behaviors or even having no motivation, honestly. So those are the things that come with pushback because they don't see, or it's more difficult to see how that student can be part of the classroom or how they're benefiting or how the other students are benefiting from them being there. Just, overall, more challenging to work with.

Mullen: Ya, and I'm very familiar. I can think of a few students just off the top of my head I remember, I really, I loved working with those students, they were so fun to figure out how to help - with your help of course. It's funny, because I hear these words all the time in PDs and meetings, the words accommodation and modification. Now you and I have had long chats about this and I think we agree on the distinction but before I get into the two words there and some of the clarification issues that teachers have with these words, but, is there anything more important than distinguishing accommodations and modifications when talking about inclusion?

Bristow: Ya, I mean, I guess I would just go back to the idea of belonging. I think that's really the most important. Of course, we need to be really transparent with parents and be on the same page as far as what path the student is going down because at a certain point, as the student becomes more and more academically behind, because that is where they're at, we start to look at the benefits of them being in the classroom on a more social, and behavioral, and independence-related than academic; then we need to really be open about that with families. But that's not for everybody, either, so I think just being really open with the parents and teachers and everyone involved to make sure that we all know what the goal is for a student.

Mullen: And that's really important because I know you're talking about the social development of the students is as much if not more important than the academic development of students, and I'm wondering if that's not a rule so much as something just to keep in mind that some students are going to need more focus on the academic portion of it, and some students are going to need more support in the social and emotional development, and being clear about which area needs more attention at home and in the classroom - do you think that's being address with the IEPs that you work with at the school's you have worked at?

Bristow: Um, I'd say largely it's not so specific, I mean I might chart generally where a student's headed but in certain cases it is necessary like if there's been pushback from teachers or not even pushback but just lack of clarity around the goal of a student being in a certain class. I've been in IEPs where we do breakdowns by period, "Ok, period one, history, we're going to work on independence", so that student's not going to have as much support because they're working

on getting out there binder and doing these other things is where academics are less important, but math is maybe all academics so we're going to have one-on-one support or small group to make sure that they get math. So it can be broken down little by little throughout the day or just a kind of general understanding of this kid's going to graduate and we're going to do what it takes to get them to graduate.

Mullen: Now when it comes to creating a more inclusive environment, and you have students whose IEPs are maybe more focused on behavior or executive functioning, when you have the more mild and moderate cases in the classroom where maybe it's something more subtle that you can often overlook and you have these practices that are being put into IEPs that are specifically addressing social development and maybe not so much the academics, how important is it that not just those students are getting that social development but all of the students even in general education?

Bristow: Yes, super important, and a really good use of resources if you're looking at it from that perspective too. If a kid comes out of general education classroom needing one-on-one with a counselor and reviews their conversational turn-taking strategies, it's way less effective than them getting an opportunity to do that in the classroom with their peers, maybe with guidance, but with peers, talking about probably something that they're more interested in than with a counselor outside the classroom. So anytime we can provide that support in the classroom, whether, we'll be doing a lot this year, having our school psychologist go into the classroom during rotations and then in elementary doing social skills curriculum for all the class as they rotate through. So the kids with the services and IEPs are getting that service but so is everyone else in the classroom and they can all practice together and reinforce throughout the day versus just this one kid getting one-on-one instruction thirty-minutes a week. So, ya, a great use of resources and it really just makes sense.

Mullen: Has that had a positive response so far in the classrooms that you're doing it?

Bristow: Yes, absolutely. You know, and then the teachers catch wind of what is being taught and they can reinforce it. I think anything that you can do that's not in isolation is better. You know there's some things that kids are really struggling with, something emotionally, and they really do need more of a therapeutic setting to process those things but, especially in elementary school, a lot of friendship things and communication that should be addressed with all the kids anyway.

Mullen: That's fantastic. Meg, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me. One last question. Are there any upcoming events, publications, other projects that people should seek out if they want to learn more about inclusion?

Bristow: Good question. I mean, in Orange County, the OCDE, the Department of Education puts out a lot of co-teaching training that are all really good. That's a good place to look if you're in Orange County. Otherwise, I'm always interested in the legal updates and court cases that

are being settled because a lot of it is around inclusion, or lack thereof, so I always find that kind of interesting as well.

Mullen: Sounds like it's a hot topic, huh?

Bristow: Yes! Yes, it is. So, ya, that's what I would say.

Mullen: Well, Meg, thank you so much, thank you again for being on the program, I really appreciate it.

Bristow: Thank you! Wonderful talking with you.

**[End Interview]**

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