

Creating Innovative Spaces, a Universally Accessible Schoolyard at James Robinson Public School in the York Region District School Board

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Abstract: James Robinson Public School at the York Region District School Board has a small student population comprised of students with multiple exceptionalities, students with autism, students with learning needs and so forth. Due to the nature of needs in our school and the variety of classrooms that we have, it is imperative that teacher instruction aligns with student need and interest. Our innovative summer pilot program allowed teachers to use environmental awareness within a universally accessible curriculum to meet these diverse learning needs and interests. The results of this program, gathered by staff members through observations, conversations and products clearly show a significant increase in student empathy, inclusiveness and achievement levels in the areas of literacy and math as per EQAO and Report Card Data.

Keywords: Innovative Program, Inclusive Learning, Universally Accessible Curriculum, Universally Accessible School yard, Environmental Stewardship, Disabilities, Reverse Integration

Overview

James Robinson PS (JRPS) has been a Gold Certified Eco-School for the past 5 years. For us, environmental stewardship is a large part of our daily practice. It is a natural routine similar to taking attendance and lining up.

At JRPS, we have students with multiple exceptionalities such as students with developmental delays who are also medically fragile, students who are visually impaired and/or deaf, students with Autism, students with sensory delays, students with special learning needs and so forth. Due to the nature of student needs in our school and the variety of classrooms that we have, it is imperative that teacher instruction aligns with student need and interest. Environmental awareness is a universally accessible curriculum, it one curriculum that is utilized by our teachers to varying degrees to teach students a variety of skills. For example, all students, with support, could place the correct waste product in the corresponding bin. All students, with support and resources, could water plants, including trees. All students, with support and direction, could help with keeping our environment clean. All students, with support and scaffolds could plant and maintain a food garden. When each student engages in this

process, they become part of a bigger picture where each one can “make a difference” in the school, in our community and the world. No matter how small a part we play, we can all have a positive impact. That is the underlying message of this universally accessible curriculum.

Building on the concept of environmental awareness and stewardship, James Robinson Public School opened up its doors to host an innovative and inclusive Satellite Summer Program in July of 2013 called RIMES.

This Reverse Integrated Multi-Exceptionalities Site (RIMES) program was geared at integrating students with multiple exceptionalities and complex needs with students who required more support in the areas of literacy and numeracy. Environmental awareness and stewardship underpinned the universally accessible curriculum utilized during RIMES. Each student was provided with opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills related to environmental education in literacy and in math. Each student applied his/her knowledge and skills to environmental issues through hands-on developmentally appropriate, action-based projects such as co-creating and sustaining community gardens, supporting and sustaining a school vermicomposter, increase diversion rate via waste reduction, water conservation, etc.)

Funding

Funding for the literacy and numeracy component of RIMES came from OFIP (Ontario Focused Intervention Program).

Funding for the special needs component of RIMES was a result of collaboration between YRDSB Continuing Education Department and City of Markham Parks and Recreation department.

Due to the huge success of this pilot program, we were able to recreate this learning opportunity in July of 2014 and expanded it to include Junior Kindergarten aged students in the Building Blocks for Kindergarten Program (BBFK).

Staffing

RIMES ran for a period of three weeks from 9:00 am until 2:30 pm during the month of July. RIMES was staffed by a multi-disciplinary team of educators and health care professionals. RIMES teachers, teacher candidates, and community volunteers worked together to provide an inclusive program with

an environmental focus. Educational Assistants assisted with program delivery, feeding routines and student toileting needs. The Children's Treatment Network and YRDSB's PT/OT provided training for all adults involved in RIMES.

The OFIP program was delivered by teachers with special education experience. The OFIP component of the program was geared towards students from a grade 1 to grade 6 with a total of 50 students. The program ran from 9:00 to 2:30 am and was free of charge.

The BBFK component of the program was geared towards students who were entering Junior Kindergarten in September. This program included a camp counselor, a Child and Youth Worker and a classroom teacher for 15 students. This program ran from 8:30 am to 12:00 pm and was free of charge.

Universally Accessible Curriculum Goes Hand in Hand with Accessible Spaces

If one did a quick Google search for the term "universally accessible curriculum", one would find a variety of resources that recommend using technology to increase access to the curriculum. Using technology in programming is like using a ramp for wheelchairs. The issue is not about getting into the building via the ramp, the issue is what do we do once we get into the building? Was the ride up the ramp worth it? We can provide students with avenues to "access" the curriculum but what we need to create is a curriculum that is worth the effort to access.

For the purpose of this paper, we will address the idea of physical accessibility first. We believe that when we create a universally accessible environment we facilitate the implementation of a universally accessible curriculum. One cannot happen without the other but there is a degree to how much of this happens.

JRPS' school yard features a universally accessible 180 meter paved learning trail that links our outdoor accessible classroom, to our native plant demonstration shade garden, to our accessible stage, and to our food and sensory gardens. By universally accessible we are referring to the ability of students with mobility devices, sensory needs, vision/hearing needs, etc. to access the environment as independently as possible.

This project was built in phases. We are currently in our third phase and planning our final fourth phase that involves creating a Loose Parts Play and community food garden section. All funds used

to complete our school yard were gathered from community donations and fundraising efforts from our school community. We have also applied for a variety of grants to support with this endeavour and have partnered with non-profit organizations. Collaboration in this economic climate is the key to our success.

Once we have a universally accessible space for all our learners, we can now view our curriculum for accessibility.

For the purpose of our RIMES program, a universally accessible curriculum was implemented with the Big Idea around Environmental Stewardship. The lessons that were created for RIMES were experiential in nature, where students inquired and posed questions while completing developmentally appropriate projects. The topics addressed within this curriculum, were ones that captured the interest of a variety of students at varying levels. It was important to keep in mind that the term “access” here is not about the resources or tools used to “read” or “write” the answers, it’s not the ramp to the building, it’s the interesting classrooms that each building has or in this case, the engaging lessons that help students see themselves as important contributors to the learning community.

The term “access” refers to the inquiries that naturally develop as a result of this type of curriculum delivery. It’s the curious questions that students ask in relation to the learning that open up discussions well beyond the book, the classroom walls and the lesson plan. Every student takes on a different angle when it comes to the lessons delivered. Each student contributes something to the lesson and is able to take learning to that next level. For example, a teacher sets up a Math Inquiry lesson where students survey each other on preferences around leaf textures for the purpose of gathering data for graphing. The students are heterogeneously grouped. In one group, a student with multiple exceptionalities who is visually impaired and requires augmentative communication devices to “talk”, is given a leaf. He feels leaf A and quickly discards it while reaching for leaf B which he holds on to and smiles, one can infer that this student prefers leaf B over the other. He contributed to this lesson and his response was recorded.

When creating the accessible curriculum for this program, we considered how each child, regardless of ability, cognitively accessed the learning and made meaning from it. Since each child is different and unique, responses to the delivered program differed. This impacted the types of products students created which were significantly different than paper and pencil tasks.

Technology was heavily utilized throughout the program. The use of iPads and SMART boards played a role in capturing learning, recording ongoing feedback and maintaining student engagement during the learning process. The use of technology increased the physical accessibility of this program.

Reflections

This program increased and refined awareness around abilities amongst our staff, students and community. Students involved in the OFIP/BBFK program were able to lead and use their strengths in support of students with multiple exceptionalities. This was an opportunity for them to shine, which is not necessarily the norm in their academic world. The increase in self-efficacy, motivation, empathy and leadership amongst each of the students surpassed expectations. This information was not only reflected in teacher observations, in student conversations but also from parent and community feedback.

Teachers gathered observations, conversations and products throughout the program to measure impact. There has been a significant increase in reading skills, numeracy skills and learning skills as evidenced in reading scores, EQAO scores and student surveys. We see evidence that the relationships that developed during the summer between the learners have been maintained throughout the school year. In addition, students who were part of the RIMES program showed significant positive changes in attitude around inclusion, bullying and engagement as evidenced in survey data.

We rarely stop to consider the impact of reverse integration onto students with special needs. How do they really feel when able-bodied students enter their classrooms? Or how do they feel when they can access outside play/learning spaces just like everyone else? With RIMES, the observations were very clear. We noticed that students with multiple exceptionalities were extremely “talkative” when their able bodied peers came into their rooms. The students in the multiple exceptionalities program made more eye contact, showed more eye tracking, vocalized more when able-bodied students entered their room as evidenced by staff observations throughout the program.

Conclusion

Based on feedback from parents, teachers, students and volunteers, this was a very positive program. We continue to look at expanding by piloting additional programs each summer. Currently, adding Mobility and Orientation training for visually impaired students is being considered because of our safe, inclusive learning environment inside and out. Our quest is to create strength-based

classrooms where students with multiple abilities come together as learners to form a new type of learning environment. We believe that each child, given the supports and time, can make a positive difference in our school, our community and our world.