



Each and Every Child



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'Social' studies: Making headway with kids on the spectrum

Inclusion model fosters social skills, maximum exposure to core curriculum

HIAWATHA – Walk into the preschool class of Libby Richardson and Mary Aull and you get the usual sense of unbridled energy emitting from

4-year-olds. They start their day with a rousing choreographed song, and then get busy with their day.

But, yet, there is something different.

Two children go to the center of the room. The others sit in a semi-circle, watching closely. One little girl taps the shoulder of a boy, and says his name. They make eye contact. They make small talk, and the girl then asks for an item that the boy has. Eventually, the boy acquiesces.

They are, in fact, modeling social behavior in the form of sharing and requesting. There's no question the exercise benefits the three students in the classroom who are on the autism spectrum. But perhaps more important, the exercise also is teaching the typical students how to communicate with their three peers, ensuring maximum inclusion.

This work comes through a process known as LEAP, which is an acronym for a mouthful: Learning Experiences and Alternative Program for



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

Preschoolers learn how to interact with all their peers.

Continued on next page

preschoolers and parents.

LEAP was brought into Nixon Elementary School – along with one other preschool in the Cedar Rapids Community School District and another in neighboring the Linn-Mar district – at the behest of the Grant Wood Area Education Agency. That was after a few AEA consultants had gone to Denver, Colo., to see a LEAP class in action.



Structured and purposeful activities put the kids in the front seat of learning to work with one another.

“We were surprised to see how independent the classroom was,” said Peggy Daugherty, a Grant Wood consultant. “And the LEAP trainer said, ‘you figure out who the special education kids are.’ We had no idea. The kids were all good friends. Their play was at a higher level.”

Grant Wood is in the first of a two-year training in LEAP, with the goal of training the AEA’s consultants to

ensure the process is sustainable in classrooms.

In a nutshell, LEAP is an inclusive preschool model which incorporates evidence-based teaching strategies. But the real difference? LEAP puts the students center stage by having them lead activities.

“Before, I think mostly adults facilitated more interactions and problem solving,” Teacher Richardson said.

“Now, we have given the kids the tools to communicate more effectively with peers. We have routines within routines within routines that help kids to independently navigate through each area of the day. And during snack time, the adults have

stepped back and let the kids guide the conversations and the language we hear is so rich and fun.”

There’s much more than social interaction going on. LEAP is giving students on the autism spectrum access to the same preschool curriculum as typical students.

“It is up to the classroom team to make the necessary adaptations and modifications to the instruction to ensure the kids are getting the instruction in a meaningful way,” said LEAP Trainer Ted Bovey, who is based at the University of Colorado, Denver. “That is why goals are embedded throughout the daily routines.”

Above all, LEAP transforms a good classroom into a dynamic one.

“You first have to look at the basic makeup of class – how things are done,” Bovey said. “Then look at the individual students. Look at data every day. What happens today drives what we do tomorrow. We don’t just take



Libby Richardson



Peggy Daugherty

Continued from the previous page

data to look at progress over time, but to drive instruction every day.”

The chief components to LEAP are:

- Focusing on naturalistic teaching: providing instruction within the context of the normal classroom in which students are not pulled out for interventions.
- Utilizing peer-mediated strategies: teaching the typical kids in the classroom how to successfully interact with their peers who have disabilities. “Teach social skills to the whole classroom with the goal of getting the other kids to learn how to have social interactions,” Bovey said. “By definition, autism is a social disorder. Try to impact those core social deficits.”
- Looking at individual supports that each kid needs, layering in

communication, visuals, and other reinforcers to help teach kids those skills. “You can use a lot of visual props to promote participation,” Bovey said.

- Providing a structured parent-skills training program to ensure consistency outside the school.

There’s no question the students are engaged – much more so than without LEAP. Just ask the teachers, who will give you a quick round-robin host of observations:



Ted Bovey



Mary Aull

the gen. ed. students and the special education students. They were running around together, all of them playing. No was off playing by himself.”

Getting to this level was slow, deliberative work.



Visual cues are everywhere in this preschool class, reaching all learners.

“The biggest change is going from asking kids to do activities, to having children ask other children to do activities,” Aull said.

“The social interaction piece has just gone through the roof,” Richardson said. “Their problem solving, their conversations – it is all so amazing.”

“That’s right – you see a lot more interaction,” Aull said. “You see it in the classroom, you see it on the playground.”

“On the playground,” Richardson adds, “you couldn’t tell the difference between

“You have to be very intentional in making everything a social interaction,” Aull said.

That includes pairing specific students to ensure the greatest social benefit. Even walking down the hallway is deliberate.

“Instead of walking single file in the hallway, they all pick a buddy and walk hand in hand,” Richardson said.

This classroom’s inclusion model also ensures quick, efficient delivery of interventions throughout the school day.

“They are getting more interventions in a day because everything done in the classroom is intentionally planned so it is embedded throughout the preschool day instead of them just getting intervention during one small part of the day,” Daugherty said.

“The other thing that increases the interventions is that they are receiving it from their peers as well as the adults in the room.”

Bovey said LEAP’s focus on full inclusion resulted in significantly better outcomes for students on the autism spectrum.

“Another outcome as it relates to social skills gains is that those gains persist over time,” he said. “As the kids move through kindergarten on up, they are able to maintain the social behaviors they have demonstrated in the past. We think that’s because kids who are moving as a cohort already know (the kids on the autism spectrum), and know to be successful in interacting with them.”

Even though Nixon Elementary is only a few months into LEAP, the teachers see marked success already.

One nonverbal student was named a captain in which he had to assign his fellow classmates specific duties.

“Our nonverbal student, when he was the center captain, came up front and he was saying every student’s name, saying it loud, ‘Kylie, come choose your center,’” Aull said.

On another day, he was in charge of snacks.

“He counted out loud each student for a snack,” Aull said. “That child amazes us.”

“This this isn’t just good for the special ed. kids, this is best practice for every kid in that classroom,” Richardson said. “When kids learn from kids, they are learning those special skills – skills that are not natural to some kids with special needs.”

What you can do now:

It’s possible to implement some of the LEAP framework in your classroom without having extensive training.

LEAP Trainer Ted Bovey suggests that teachers work targeted social skills into a classroom where there are young kids on the spectrum present.

“I’m not talking about interaction with adults,” he said. “It is about creating a peer network so that they can be successful with their peers. If you can do that, you will see long-term growth with these children.”



Structured and varied activities throughout the school day fully awakens the students’ senses, encourages social skills and delivers core instruction.