**Journal of an Inclusion Teacher**

**First Week of School**

Another year is starting, with a whole new set of new faces for me to get to know. Although I've been teaching for years now, I am still a bundle of nerves and anxiety my first day of school. This year especially, as I am going to teach an inclusion classroom for the first time ever. The majority of my students will be considered general education students and will not receive specialized instruction. Three of my kiddos, however, are classified as special needs and each have very different conditions with a wide array of needs.

I met with the students' resource teacher and teachers from last year to discuss how best to serve them while also meeting the needs of the rest of my students. One of my students, nine-year-old Maise, comes to me with a learning disability and severe dyslexia. Reading is very difficult for her and writing is so difficult it often frustrates her to the point of tears. My other special needs child is Cody, a bright boy whose behavioral issues have put him behind in his coursework. Cody has been labeled as emotionally disturbed and ADHD. Although he has no intellectual disorders, he reads at a kindergarten level and qualifies for intervention services. My final special needs kid is Sammy. Sammy has mild to moderate autism. He rarely speaks and does not like to make eye contact, but I am told he is a creative genius when it comes to art. Sammy is also very delayed in his writing and reading skills as language is difficult for him.

I cannot wait to meet my kids for the first time. I only hope I can help them.

**Second Week of School**

Well the first week has come and gone, and overall, it went pretty well. I love my class, just like I knew I would. So far, they are respectful and seem very accepting of my inclusion students. To build classroom community, we played some cooperative games and read books that focused on accepting differences and reaching out to new classmates to make friends. We also did a few simple writing exercises in our journals so the children could express their feelings about the start of a new school year and I could start to see where they are at as writers.

Third grade is very heavy in writing, so it is extremely important that I start conferencing with my students and identifying their needs as soon as possible. This week, we are going to start our writers workshop. Judging what my students wrote in their journals, I can see that most of them appear to be where they should be at the start of the third grade. There were numerous errors in spelling and grammar, but their writings made sense and had basic conventions and structure. My inclusion students were not quite as proficient as their classmates, but they still answered their prompts and I was able to understand most of what they wrote. Sammy wrote the least out of everyone in the class. When asked what he did over the summer, he responded that he "ate pizza and slept." When asked how he was feeling about this school year he said "Okay but tired."

I conferenced with Sammy to ask him what he did during the fifteen minutes we had to write. Sammy did not say anything, choosing instead to show me. He pulled out a folded up piece of notebook paper shoved into his desk and slid it across the table. I opened it to find an incredibly detailed and realistic drawing of a castle. It looked like it had been drawn by a professional artist. Clearly, the other teachers were not exaggerating about Sammy. He is an artistic genius.

**Sixth Week of School**

The students have finally gotten the hang writers workshop and genuinely seem to enjoy the time they get to write about whatever they want. Maise has had a few outbursts of frustration writing on paper, but after I told her she could type her writing on the computer, she has settled down a lot. I think having spell check and not having to worry about her handwriting has made the writing process much less terrifying for her. Cody really seems to be thriving under the freedom of the workshop. He writes mainly about minecraft and other video games, but that is what he is truly passionate about. His stories are creative and he gets so wrapped up in writing sometimes that he does not want to stop. Other times, when he feel a bit rowdier and cannot sit still, I allow him to change locations or write standing up. Letting him write on chart paper with markers while standing has proven an effective way to keep him engaged on days when impulse control is more difficult.

Sammy is the only child I have who has not really improved any in his writing this first six-weeks. He still gives one or two word answers to writing prompts, and says he cannot think of a topic during writers workshop. All he wants to do is draw, and although I want to encourage his art, I cannot allow him to get further and further behind in his studies. Today I decided to try a new approach. Rather than just telling him to put his drawings away and start writing, I decided to make a deal with him. He can draw during writers workshop as long as I have at least five well developed sentences by the end of the block. Sammy agreed, but still complained about not having anything to write about. I pulled out the drawing he did the day before and pointed to it. "Write about that," I told him. Sammy sat quietly for a long time and stared at his artwork. I thought maybe he had not heard me, but after five or so minutes had passed, Sammy grabbed his pencil and wrote an entire paragraph in a flash.

I watched him write from across the room. I was so excited to see him working I wanted to run over there, grab the paper and start reading it. Sammy wrote exactly five sentences and then pulled out a clean sheet of paper and started to draw. I asked him if I could read his paper. He grunted but did not look up from what he was working on. It was his allotted time to draw and he was not about to waste it on talking to me.

Sammy's drawing that he chose to write about was of dozens of squares and rectangles filling in almost every inch of the page. I thought it was just an abstract piece, but after reading his writing I discovered that it was the top down view of a city. Sammy wrote about how the city was on an island that you could only access by helicopter. His drawing was of himself flying over the city for the first time. Although his entry was full of technical errors and somewhat hard to read, the content was beautiful. I almost teared up thinking about all the wonderful thoughts that roamed around in this boys head that were never expressed because of difficulties with language. It is now my goal to give Sammy the gift of words and give him a whole new outlet to let his amazing voice be heard.

**Eighth Week of School**

The kids have been working so hard this week on writing their own fairy tales. It is truly inspiring to see how creative they can be when given the time and opportunity to be. I told them all we were going to turn our fairy tales into books complete with illustrations and hardbound covers. We are going to add our books to the class library, and possibly even the school library. The kids were so excited to hear that their published works could be checked out alongside books by professional authors. I reminded them that the only difference between them and a professional writer is a paycheck.

Sammy was delighted to be working on something where drawing was actually a part of the assignment and not just an incentive. He started his drawings first and made a sort of story board before tackling the writing. He is still working very diligently on it, but it is already the longest piece he has ever written. He does not want me or anyone to see it until he is completely finished. I cannot wait!

**Tenth Week of School**

Sammy just finished his fairy tale. Everyone else in the class finished up last week, but Sammy was working so hard, I told him to just keep going. I have never seen him so engaged in a lesson, especially one involving writing. When he was all done, he slipped it onto my desk without saying a word. I almost missed it entirely.

When I read it later that day after the kids had gone home, I started to cry. Not only were his illustrations beautiful and detailed, but his writing was absolutely marvelous. He told the story of a boy who found an ordinary stone in his backyard and put it in his pocket. When the boy had the stone in his pocket, it gave him miraculous powers. An evil wizard tried to take the stone, but the boy defeated him and good prevailed.

The story was so creative and his writing so lovely I knew I had to do something to encourage Sammy to keep writing creatively. I bound all the children's books and included them in our classes library. For Sammy, however, I met with the school librarian and showed her what he had written. She was so impressed she decided she suggested I enter his book in a national student writing competition. I asked Sammy the next day if he would like me to do that and he was ecstatic.

**End of School Year**

We finally got the results of the student writing competition. Sammy was entered into a competition against students from all the elementary grades from all over the country. To are delight, he came in third place nationally. Sammy got a certificate and a hundred-dollar cash prize. We were all so happy for him and his success, the principal announced his accomplishment during an assembly and we had a party for him later that day. I've never seen Sammy smile so much. We are all so proud of him and how far he has come as a writer, but no one is more proud of Sammy than Sammy himself. I know this is not the last time we will hear of him and his amazing gifts.