



Teachers Make a Difference - Conversation with Sarah Hoyt

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It was an absolute pleasure to meet and speak with Sarah Hoyt, recipient of the 2018 Canadian Association for Community Living National Inclusive Education Award. Her passion for connecting with learners shines as she speaks about her students' progress. Sarah's gentle and practical approach to including learners is only part of the reason she was recognized with this award. Sarah wants to make a difference in her students' lives and wants her students to feel cared for and respected. Check out some of our conversation where she shares about a learner who successfully rejoined the class after working in an alternate learning setting and the practical strategies she uses to support learners.

SG: *What inspired you to choose teaching as a career?*

SH: I believe that anyone who chooses to work in education feels a calling to do so. I didn't always feel that calling upon my life and it wasn't until I began working in a school on a weekly basis, teaching small group music classes, that I realized how important the work with our future leaders was.

I was blessed with supportive, loving, compassionate parents growing up. I know that my children now receive that support, love and compassion in their home. I also know there are many children in our system who do not feel those qualities at home. It has been my mission to make sure that every child I teach feels loved and supported and like they belong. I have been called into the education field to do just that.

SG: *Tell me about the learner whose family nominated you for the New Brunswick Canadian Association for Community Living Inclusion Award?*

SH: I had a student in one of my classes that had not been spending his days in the common learning environment for more than a year. He was an incredibly bright boy, kind and well-spoken. He also had many challenges. He was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder and required adult support with emotional regulation.

The moment I met this student, it was my goal to have him in my classroom with his peers as soon as possible. I knew that this was not going to happen overnight. So, with the support and constant guidance of my amazing resource team, I began to lay the groundwork. Each day, during my preparation time or during recess, I spent one-on-one time with this student. We played games, talked, got to know each other and began to build a level of trust with one another. When I knew I would be absent, I would leave notes of encouragement or support on this child's desk so that he knew I would not be in to visit them that day but I

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Sarah Hoyt is an educator in Anglophone School District West at Nashwaaksis Memorial School as the 0.7 Guidance Counsellor and 0.3 Music Specialist.

Over the past ten years she has taught in elementary school as a classroom, music, and guidance teacher.

Sarah was one of seven New Brunswick professionals who were recognized for outstanding contribution to inclusive education in 2018 with a National Inclusive Education Award from the Canadian Association for Community Living (CACL).

had not forgotten him. As the days moved forward, knowing the special interests of this child, I asked if there was a willingness to Skype with the class from the alternate workspace. He agreed to the Skype meeting. As we were Skyping, for connections to be made, I polled my students to see if they had some of the same interests as their classmate. When he saw his classmates' hands go up, a huge smile came over his face.

Shortly thereafter, I began inviting him to visit his classmates. I placed no timeframe on the visits. It could be a spur of the moment thing, whenever he felt ready to do so. That first visit, I remember dropping everything the moment he walked in. He had chosen to come to the classroom!! Being a math whiz and an exceptional reader, I asked him if he would like to present some math problems to his classmates. He excitedly led a math activity with his classmates. The visit was short but was such a huge success.

Over the next number of days, he visited again and would either bring math problems with him or read a chapter out of our class novel aloud to his peers. I could see that he was beginning to form connections with his classmates as his comfort level began to increase within the classroom setting.

As the visits to the classroom continued to increase, I began decreasing my time going to see him in his alternate workspace. My hope was that he would want to spend more and more time within the classroom setting with his peers and with me as his teacher. Well, believe it or not, he was in my classroom full-time by December! He invited students to his birthday party for the first time and was excited to do so. He was making connections and experiencing social interactions that you and I may take for granted, for the first time. It was so rewarding to watch it all fall into place.

SG: What do you do to include learners with differing needs at school?

SH: I differentiate any activities to accommodate the diverse needs of my students. This might involve:

- Contingent breaks (a break earned as a result of a goal achieved) and non-contingent breaks (a break provided because I recognize the need for a break in my students)
- Incentive programs
- Visual schedules
- Use of sensory tools (putty, Velcro under desks, etc.)
- Incorporating movement tools (stationary bikes, walks with a purpose, brain breaks)
- Teaching about emotional regulation, and how the brain works/Pairing students together of differing abilities
- Teaching social skills
- Using Skype with students
- Helping students feel safe by building relationships between me and the student, as well as students with their peers.

SG: What would be your recommendations to school staff when working with learners with diverse needs?

SH: Relationship is always Number ONE! Some other recommendations would include:

- Teach all students about empathy.
- Be willing to try different strategies if one doesn't appear to be working.
- Be open to consulting with others.
- Have a team approach. Use the knowledge and expertise of colleagues in your building.
- Remember that "Fair is not always Equal and Equal is not always Fair."
- Think outside of the box.

About Us

Autism Learning Partnership, a branch of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) in New Brunswick (Canada), is the sole provider of the Provincial Autism Training curriculum for preschool autism agencies and educational personnel in New Brunswick. The Autism Learning Partnership provides bilingual, evidence-based, high-quality professional learning and resources to support families, preschool autism agency personnel and educational personnel in the province, and has a mandate to establish partnerships with organizations nationally and internationally.