



The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 8, Episode 6

Jenny Kurth | Implementing Inclusive Education with Participation Plans

Jennifer Kurth (00:01):

I remember when I was a special education teacher people would say, well, you know, why is, why is this child in my class? He can't, and then they, you know, fill in the blank. He can't read, he can't talk. He can't whatever. What are they going to get out of it? They're so far behind grade levels. So all of this kind of deficit thinking kind of focused on these students. And I would always be like, they're going to get a lot out of it. There's so many things that we don't even think about that are happening in this general education classroom that are so, so helpful.

Tim Villegas (00:35):

Hello, and welcome to season eight, episode six of the Think Inclusive podcast presented by MCIE. I'm your host, Tim Villegas. This podcast features conversations and commentary with thought leaders in inclusive education and community advocacy. Think Inclusive exists to build bridges between parents, educators, and disability rights advocates to promote inclusion for all students. That's right, y'all. All means all. To find out more about who we are and what we do go to thinkinclusive.us, the official blog of MCIE, and check us out on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Tim Villegas (01:20):

So it's April everyone, and you know what that means. It's Autism acceptance month. And on the blog, I wrote a piece about ways educators can learn Autism acceptance from Autistic individuals. And one of those ways is to amplify disability rights activists in your classroom. So if that sounds interesting, check it out and lots of other great information at thinkinclusive.us.

Tim Villegas (01:49):

Today on the podcast, we talk with Jenny Kurth, professor of special education at the University of Kansas. We discuss preparing for and implementing participation plans for students with complex support needs to be included in general education and why we should all carry around a pocket-sized version of IDEA.

Tim Villegas (02:12):

Will you be the person to bring our patron number to double digits? Go to patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast to become a patron today. Your contribution helps us with the cost of audio production, transcription, and promotion of the Think Inclusive Podcast. Thank you for helping us equip more people to promote and sustain inclusive education. Stick around, after the break, our interview with Jenny Kurth.

Tim Villegas (02:39):

How do you know you're an inclusionist? In 1997, Ellen Brantlinger from Indiana University first used the term inclusionist, which for many means someone who wants to get of special education. Decades of research show better outcomes for people with disabilities when they are included and authentic inclusion is happening in schools and districts around the country and the world, some nearing 90% inclusion rates or above for many years. This progress did not just happen, but is the result of careful planning led by educational visionaries and the implementation of strategies that promote effective inclusive education. It's time to bring back the moniker of inclusionist to mean a collaborator for inclusive practices, not simply someone who wants to throw the whole system away without replacing it with something better. If this resonates with you, you are an inclusionist. And do we have the newsletter for you? The Weeklyish is for inclusionists. Subscribe at [weeklyish.substack.com](https://www.weeklyish.substack.com).

Tim Villegas (04:23):

Today on the Think Inclusive Podcast, I would like to welcome Dr. Jenny Kurth, who is the associate professor of special education at the University of Kansas. Her research centers on inclusive education for students with extensive and pervasive support needs. Welcome to the podcast, Jenny.

Jennifer Kurth (04:44):

Yeah. Thank you. Thanks for having me here, Tim.

Tim Villegas (04:47):

So the reason why I even thought about like, we need to get Jenny on is the, the article that you wrote in CEC. And of course I don't have it in front of me. Well, let me grab it. You can see I'm very prepared.

Jennifer Kurth (05:08):

I know the feeling.

Tim Villegas (05:11):

All right. Yeah, so the article is called Preparing for and implementing effective inclusive education with participation plans." And something at MCIE that we're really that we love doing is doing like individual student planning for students who are, who are included in general education. And I love the article and I have lots of questions. So I wanted to dive in this with you. But before, before we get into like the, you know, what a participation plan is and everything, I'd love for you to talk about why inclusive education is a matter social justice.

Jennifer Kurth (05:59):

Yeah. I think that's a great question. And it made me you know, think about a couple of different things. And one of the things that we know just, you know, really solidly know is that people with disabilities or who experience disabilities have inequitable outcomes upon leaving school. And so when we think about, you know, what has been happening for people who have disabilities over the past 45 years or even longer? Well, they've been separated, segregated, controlled, you know decisions made for them, lack of communication supports, all of these sorts of things have just been the status quo in education for all of this time. And so when we start talking about inclusive education, I think we're really talking about disrupting those practices that are focused on, you know, control, segregation, you know, those sorts of things that can maybe lead to better outcomes for people.

Jennifer Kurth (06:52):

And when you just look briefly at what does social justice mean? If you look in the dictionary talks about the distribution of wealth, opportunity, and privilege within a society. And if you think about where is the wealth, opportunity, and privilege within schools, it's in general education, it is not in those separate special education classes. And so we think about, you know, what are the, the wealth in the general education classrooms? Well, it's the kids without disabilities, who you can talk to and play with and learn with. It's the teachers who are content area experts. It's the opportunities to have a structured curriculum with the scope and a sequence. The opportunities tie into all of those things as well in terms of having a real curriculum and not just like a series of random worksheets or something like that, that people are just pulling together to teach with.

Jennifer Kurth (07:41):

And then obviously, you know, the privilege, the opportunity to learn, the privilege of having high expectations of, you know, being a member of a classroom and a valued member of the classroom, nonetheless, the dignity of learning and the dignity of having opportunities to learn from and with other people. So, you know, you just think kind of, even simply that there's so many opportunities related to social justice that happened in these inclusive settings that we really need to focus on. And you know, I think that as inclusive education in and of itself doesn't do that. You can't just put a kid in a classroom and all of a sudden, you know, there's social justice happening and all of the inequities disappear, but you have to plan for it. We have to really think about how we're going to support people and to meet their needs and have that general education classroom be the place where they are valued.

Jennifer Kurth (08:33):

They're learning, they're having opportunities, you know, all of those sorts of things. So to me, that's, those are some of the reasons why inclusive education is an issue of social justice. And I'm really anxious as a field to start moving into a place where we don't have to talk about these kinds of advocacy people for students with disabilities. That we can really say you know, everybody belongs and that there's no like false binary anymore about either special education for special things or general education for everybody else, but that there's really this one common education that can really meet the needs of everybody. And I think what's kind of exciting to me is that we're at a place in our field where we know how to do that. When people started advocating for inclusive education, you know, before I was born. And that's, what's also just disheartening, I guess to me, is that we've been talking about this for a long time. But when people started talking about inclusive education, it came only from that place of social justice, that it felt like the right thing to do, separating and segregating felt wrong, but now we know how to do it. We know that it results in positive outcomes, you know, for kids with disabilities and without disabilities that, you know, parents prefer it. We just have so much overwhelming, you know, legal, philosophical, and research-based reasons to do it. That there's just really no reason to continue on with the status quo. In my opinion.

Tim Villegas (10:02):

With the new focus on equity, especially, I mean, in education we've been focusing on equity for a long time, but it seems like there is a change in other fields to look at equity. Are you hopeful that that is also going to bring some new light?

Jennifer Kurth (10:26):

I am always hopeful about that. I was talking somewhat about this in our class last night, where I'm teaching people to be special education teachers and that, you know, talking with them about some of the things that they were raised with in terms of having kids with disabilities in their classrooms or their schools even. The focus around social justice and equity happening kind of nationwide and even worldwide right now, but it starts to help us move in that direction. And I feel, you know, maybe as an older person now, that the next generation has a lot going for it in terms of what they're going to be offering. But part of it is that we still need to keep doing the work. We can't just wait for the next generation to come and say, you know, we're woke, we understand social justice and equity.

Jennifer Kurth (11:12):

We need to really teach people and teach ourselves to look for and really be critical thinking about the instances of inequity that happened in our schools. And you know, you just peel back the lid a little bit and you see it everywhere. And so it reminds us, there's a lot of work to do. You know, we were kind of thinking about, you know, equity and opportunity and high expectations can, can play out in so many different ways. But one of the things that I, I think I often see is that we have so many examples in our schools and communities that keep positioning people with disabilities as being special and needing special things. So it's anything from night to shine or unique learning systems or those sorts of things that are just saying, you know, there's this assumption that people with disabilities have special needs versus human needs.

Jennifer Kurth (12:08):

And I think getting away from that euphemism about being special and having special needs can help us focus more on human needs. And then therefore take us closer to this place of equity that I think we're seeking. So I'm trying to really hard to in my teacher preparation, to have people really look for those and say, what are the things that are happening that are making these people with disabilities seem that they're somehow special or different? And how can we reframe that through advocacy or just, you know, simply like everyone goes to the same prom. It's the prom. We should all be able to have fun together, you know, those sorts of things. And so I think by really taking that close look we can start to get there a little bit faster. But I think there's also worked for us to do in terms of, you know, people like me who are doing teacher education and doing research that we need to be at the forefront as well.

Jennifer Kurth (13:05):

Changing some of the ways that we're going about doing our research, that we have to involve students with disabilities more, they need to be centered on our decisions and not doing things for and about them as we have kind of historically been doing. And then also, you know, making sure that the research agendas that we lay out are based on their needs and their preferences and their desires and not so much about, what's easy for me to do as a researcher, for example. So really trying to kind of lead in those ways, but then also just thinking about, you know, even some of the language that we're using. I hate special education, for example. To me that is really, when you say you're a special education teacher or you're working in special education, it takes people to either the assumptions that, "Oh, you must be, you know, really patient and kind." I'm not, I'm really impatient and I'm not very, probably not very nice either. Like I wanna, I want to make things happen for people. So, you know, maybe taking that away. And then having the special education makes people assume that there's a classroom with special things in it. And if maybe instead we started talking about, you know, specialized supports or something like that. So that it's really thinking about supports that follow people wherever they go,

versus having the special education program or place. That might kind of help us maybe hopefully move in other directions as well.

Tim Villegas (14:30):

Yeah. You know I don't think I ever put it together that in the law it doesn't actually say special education until I really started to look at it. And, yeah, it's always, it's always, it's interesting. Yeah.

Jennifer Kurth (14:48):

I, I feel the same way. Like when you look at IDEA, Congress did a good job. There's things I would obviously change, but there's a lot in there that is strengths-based and kind of forward thinking and really, you know, focusing on outcomes. And if it's almost like, you know, how, when you watch people in the Senate or something, and they pull out their copy of the constitution from their front pocket, like, I wish we could just like pull out our copy of IDEA from our front pockets and be like, "Well, you know, section 600.331 says..." I just feel like it's there and we just need to live up to that kind of lofty aspirations that are already in IDEA.

Tim Villegas (15:28):

Right? Yeah, yeah. Yeah. It's like the original document, you know?

Jennifer Kurth (15:32):

Right. Exactly.

Tim Villegas (15:33):

That's a good idea, Jenny. Maybe we should market that.

Jennifer Kurth (15:39):

A pocket IDEA. It kind of dorky, but, but I always think it might be helpful. I don't know.

Tim Villegas (15:52):

What are you reading there? Oh just reading IDEA.

Jennifer Kurth (15:55):

Just IDEA.

Tim Villegas (15:57):

Fine. And then I've got a, I've got a binder of the federal register.

Jennifer Kurth (16:01):

Right. Exactly. You know, good stuff. Yeah.

Tim Villegas (16:05):

Good stuff. Right. Well, let's talk about the participation plans cause I really really enjoyed reading this. Why don't you set it up for our listeners, because I'm sure you could do a better job than I could. So, you

know, what, what is the participation plan and why do you students, why should students, why should educators use them?

Jennifer Kurth (16:27):

Yeah. So when we were thinking about doing this little, you know, creation of these participation plans, it was really based on kind of two things, I guess to me. One is that I remember when I was a special education teacher people would say, well, you know, "Why is, why is this child in my class? He can't..." And then they, you know, fill in the blank. He can't read, he can't talk, he can't whatever. What are they going to get out of it? They're so far behind grade level. So all of this kind of deficit thinking kind of focused on these students. And I would always be like, they're going to get a whole lot out of it. There are so many things that we don't even think about that are happening in the general education classroom that are so, so helpful.

Jennifer Kurth (17:12):

And so for me, the participation plan is one way of starting to outline those things and say, here's why general education is a meaningful place for every student. It's not a place you have to earn your way into and all of those sorts of things, but something helpful for everybody. But then I also was thinking when we were creating it that having a plan that's co-created with general and special education teachers is really, really helpful in terms of bringing their joint expertise to this planning, but then also making sure their planning was oriented around research-based practices so that it was giving them sort of a structure to think through so that when they were thinking about a student coming into their classroom for this particular unit or whatever, that they would be able to draw on some some research-based practices to guide their discussions.

Jennifer Kurth (18:01):

And so, it starts with, and I did print mine out so I would remember. It starts with an ecological assessment. And so part of the idea there is that this has been something that, you know, we talk about in special education forever, that you need to understand what the demands of the environment are and make sure that we understand where a student does and does not need support during these sort of typical routines. And so taking the time to say, you know, "Jenny needs support here, but not here" is really helpful so that I'm not over supported and developed learned helplessness or, you know, something like that, but that I do get the support when I need it so that I'm able to keep learning. So we want to just be careful to do those ecological assessments and say over this, you know, typical activity. So maybe in this science class, it starts off with a warm-up on the board and then the teacher does a lecture and then there's a lab. And then there's a writing in your planners at the end of the class period. So those are the four things that typically happen. Let's just see what supports Jenny would need for each of those four parts. And then having that sort of, as the foundation can help us layer in support so that we know when and what to do.

Jennifer Kurth (19:17):

We also wanted to really focus on sort of the hidden skills, so that maybe you know, in this participation plan, it's really focused on identifying times to work on IEP goals and then priority learning skills. But even outside of those, there's a loss of hidden opportunities to learn. Like maybe I'm still learning to raise my hand instead of calling out or I'm learning to communicate with my lab partners using my communication device or whatever that might be. So those would be opportunities to work on additional skills that are maybe not the priority for that content area. Thinking about what supports I

would need. So are there kind of general supports that everybody has, or really individual supports that I would need?

Jennifer Kurth (20:03):

And one of the things that I like in terms of focusing on general supports is that when we look in a, you know, typical general education classroom, there's a lot of supports already provided, maybe there's, you know, words written on the wall or a timer or a schedule or those sorts of things that we can start to build from. And then making sure that those are available to everybody. And then recognizing that some kids will also need more individualized supports. Like maybe I need a couple other words written on my desk or something like that to help me.

Jennifer Kurth (20:36):

Then it goes into embedded instructions to how we're going to find opportunities to teach skills and then linking those to, linking the skills that we're going to be teaching to the content that's happening. So for example, if we're teaching, you know, learning about the digestive system, I'm going to have some priority skills related to that learning about the digestive system. And, and so that could be a really helpful conversation to have with the general education teacher. I know when I was a teacher and I've had this happen in, in research opportunities too, when I go and ask that science general education teacher, for example, like what, what are kids going to learn in this unit about the digestive system? They're going to come at me with like 57 vocabulary words, 30 science lab skills 25 you know, content related things or something like that. And so that's great for some kids. There's some kids who are going to learn all of that. And some kids who are going to learn a subset of that.

Jennifer Kurth (21:44):

And so working with that general ed teacher and saying, well, out of all of those really great things, cause I know how much you love science, what are the things that are really important that you want every person to remember from this unit 15 years from now? And then if we can kind of start to hone in on what those things are, those could become the priority learning skills for students in who are, have more extensive and pervasive support needs, who are in that general education classroom. And so thinking about that priority skills can help us make some of those decisions about what should we base our accommodations and modifications on. What should the general education teacher make sure that they say every class period so that we're reinforcing those big skills, but, and just really making sure that we're focusing on them and giving kids opportunities to learn those things.

Jennifer Kurth (22:31):

And so to me, the, you know, the priority or the participation plan can be a way to start bringing those ideas together and making sure that we have, you know, an idea of how we're going to be teaching kids and that it makes sense and that we all think that there's useful things happening for the students in the class. And we all know what we want people to be learning and how they're going to be learning it when they're in that class. So I think it's helpful in aligning, you know, those instructions and modifications, for example.

Tim Villegas (23:11):

You know, how do we support teachers when they don't have built in that collaboration time? And, you know, it's kinda like that same idea, right? You know, what is this kid going to get out of it? I mean, I'm

going to have to spend all this extra time planning for this student. So how can we talk? How can we speak to that?

Jennifer Kurth (23:33):

It's a legitimate, good question because I hear it all the time and it sounds like you do too. And it's, it's the reality. I mean, we are asking teachers to do so much and not giving the time and resources to do it. So I, I don't want this kind of planning thing to feel like one of those. So couple of thoughts. One is that say my student is involved in this science class all year long, which hopefully they are, they're a full-time member of the science class. We might spend a little extra time doing this planning together the first one to three units of instruction, but then we're like, yeah, we know what to do during lecture. So even if we're learning about the digestive system or astronomy or whatever, we got to plan for lectures. Oh, and guess what, we've also got a plan for labs. Oh, and guess what? We've got a plan for, you know, taking notes from the board.

Jennifer Kurth (24:25):

So it becomes something that there's skills that you're generating that are going to be useful across time. Now let's say, boy, you know, this, the science teacher had a really out of the box idea and they're going to do a task that we've never planned for before. I might need to then get, sit back down with that Jenna teacher and talk about this unique thing that's happening. But you know, teachers don't often do that and it's because they don't have the time or resources to do a lot of, you know, really creative thinking. And if they do, it could still be a shorter conversation planning around that one unique thing. So that's one thought is that this is a skill and a task that's going to be transportable across the student's day.

Jennifer Kurth (25:04):

So I could even then say, "Hey, when I was talking to Tim, the science teacher, I'm going to now bring some of these ideas to Kayla, the English teacher and say, 'Hey, these are some things we thought about for lecture. What do you think, how would that work in your classroom?'" And then it's going to help those conversations unfold easier. And the other thing is you know, I think it is part of being a teacher is that you have to be a leader and an advocate. And if you want to have high quality instruction, you have to bring those leadership and advocacy skills to your principal and say, I need to be part of grade level team meetings, or I need to be part of content level team meetings so that I can have time to talk to teachers during the dedicated times when that's already happening in our schools.

Jennifer Kurth (25:47):

So that's one other thing. And then I think we can also be a little bit more flexible in how we, how we do planning. There's no reason that this participation plan couldn't be put on a Google doc or something like that, where you can start taking notes and filling it all out together online, but not together. And so that, then I can see, you know, what Tim wrote and I can add to it or something. And so then we do have two or three or five minutes to talk in person, it's just catching up about what we already wrote in this, you know, shared document that we're working from. So I think to me that that's an example of having to be a flexible thinker and an advocate. There's never going to be more time or more money or all of the things that we want, but we have to be creative about, you know, finding another way to do things.

Jennifer Kurth (26:36):

And I think it was Mark Gold in the seventies who kind of, you know, trademarked that talking about special education was find another way. And it's kind of like the living, you know, mantra, I guess in my life. If this way didn't work, we've got to find another way because it's so important that we keep doing these things. And so figure out what works for you and thinking about this as being a, you know, over time, time saver, or there's a little bit of investment upfront but over time it'll save you a lot of collaboration and planning and kind of on the spot decision-making that could lead to bad decisions, honestly, for students. If you're just always like, I don't know what to focus on, so we're going to just do this activity. Whereas having a plan would make us be more conscious and mindful of what the goals are for the students and how they're going to be supported to meet those goals rather than, you know, leaving it up to chance or, you know, coming up with things moment by moment all the time.

Jennifer Kurth (27:33):

Which I know I did too much of as a teacher. I didn't have a great plan and I wished that I would have, and, you know, because I didn't have a great plan a lot of times those decisions were left to paraprofessionals who are working with students and their, you know, that was my first job being a paraprofessional. And that's a really difficult position to put untrained teachers and to make those decisions. So we need to be kind of upfront and helping people make those decisions and having some, you know, structure to fall back on.

Tim Villegas (28:01):

Let's say you were appointed the US Secretary of Education. Sorry, Dr. Cardona. Dr. Kurth is now the secretary of ed. What would you, what would be your biggest priority?

Jennifer Kurth (28:13):

It's hard to say my biggest, but I think one of the things that I would really want to address is this outdated version or notion of the least restrictive environment. I am thinking that the only people in the United States we talk about their degree of appropriate restrictiveness is kids with disabilities and prisoners who are incarcerated in jails and prisons. And it just seems like such an odd thing to me that we even talk then about how restricted some people should be when they've committed no crimes, you know, they're, they're not a danger to society. They're just kids trying to go to school and learn. But for some reason we're treating them like prisoners. So I would like to just get rid of that. I know that when the LRE was first proposed, it was kind of intended to be this, you know, short-term thing to kind of get kids back into school or get kids into schools, but it has far outlasted its use.

Jennifer Kurth (29:14):

And there is no reason to have this continuum of placements anywhere in federal law, because we have so much evidence showing that that's, that's not helpful to separate and segregate students at all ever. You can find hundreds, probably thousands of research articles showing the importance and the positive outcomes associated with inclusive education for students with complex support needs. But I challenge you to find even one, demonstrating even one positive outcome for a separate or segregated setting. So the evidence is so clear that we just don't need to have that anymore. When I think when people thought about the LRE you know, back in the seventies, they were like, well, you know, teachers aren't trained yet. They were just admiring all the barriers, but we don't need to do that in 2021. Or whenever, you know, IDEA has reauthorized. Those are, that's an easy thing we can do.

Jennifer Kurth (30:09):

And I think I also mentioned, I would really like to eliminate just the very idea of special education and start focusing more on supports. And instead of having kids qualify for special education because of an educational label and a need for special education, both of those things are markers for segregation. So instead if we said, what are the support needs that a student has and really thought about those in terms of communication support needs or behavior support needs or academic support needs or physical support needs or whatever, and then said, let's design an education system that addresses those supports through specialized supports versus through special education, which is kind of, you know, a mess. It's just not very effective, honestly. So really thinking about, to me, those two things I think would make a really big difference in how we thought about you know, the dignity and the right to learn and all of those things of students with complex support needs and to think about promoting inclusive education for them as well.

Tim Villegas (31:17):

Awesome. Awesome. Well, I would nominate you.

Jennifer Kurth (31:21):

Thanks, Tim. I don't want the job. That sounds like a lot.

Tim Villegas (31:28):

Yeah, it does. It does. Oh, this has been a great conversation. Let me see if I missed anything. I think we covered it all. What is, is there anything that you that you wish that you could tell our audience?

Jennifer Kurth (31:45):

I think what I wish I could tell the audience is, I'm going to base this around person who's been living in Kansas for the last seven years. When you live in Kansas and people hear you're from Kansas, they bring out all the Wizard of Oz jokes. And so you're like, Oh yeah, you know, I've, I've, I've heard the one about where's Toto and like click my shoes and whatever. But one of the things that I like about the Wizard of Oz, and this is something I heard somebody else say, is that Dorothy, poor Dorothy was stuck over the rainbow and just wanted desperately to go home. And she didn't know the whole time that she was so sad that she could have just clicked her shoes and gone home. And she had a lot more power than she realized she had throughout that whole film. And I think that's what I would want people listening to this to think about is that you have so much power that you might not even recognize that you have in terms of promoting positive outcomes and a dignified experience and inclusive education for learners with the most complex support needs. And so I hope that you use that power and that you're not afraid to use it to do good work.

Tim Villegas (32:52):

All right. Well thank you again to Dr. Jenny Kurth for being on the Think Inclusive Podcast. We appreciate your time.

Tim Villegas (33:04):

That will do it for this episode of the Think Inclusive Podcast. Subscribe to the Think Inclusive podcast via Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify, or on the Anchor app. And while you're there, give us a review so more people can find us. Have a question or comment, email us at podcast@thinkinclusive.us. We love

to know that you're listening. Thank you to patrons Pamela P, Veronica E, Kathleen T, and Mark C for the continued support of the podcast. This podcast is a production of MCIE, where we envision a society where neighborhood schools welcome all learners and create the foundation for inclusive communities. Learn more at mcie.org. We will be back at the end of April with a special bonus episode. And if you don't already subscribe to our newsletter, the Weeklyish, check us out at weeklyish.substack.com. Thanks for your time and attention. See you next time. And remember, inclusion always works.

Follow Think Inclusive on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#) @think_inclusive.

Follow MCIE on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#) @inclusionmd.