



The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 6, Episode 8

Nikki Heiman | My Creative Inclusion

Tim Villegas (00:00):

In 2012, Carly's Acon and Danielle Weisberg founded the skimm from their couch. Now six years later, their morning newsletter gives over 7 million subscribers, the news and information they need to start their day. When they started the company, they got a lot of advice from other female entrepreneurs. Now they're sharing those conversations and more on their podcast, skimm from the couch. Every week you'll hear from women like Arianna Huffington, the founder of the Huffington Post, and thrive on why she puts her phone to bed at night or Melanie Wheeland, CEO of soul cycle on why she has a millennial mentor or how actor Taraji P. Henson got over her first rejection and learned how to negotiate for herself. It's a podcast about the real stuff, tips and tricks to launch, grow or change your career. The only rule on the couch, no BS checkout, skimm from the couch or wherever you listen to podcasts.

Nikki Heiman (00:55):

I am Nicky Haiman and you are listening to the think inclusive podcasts.

Tim Villegas (01:00):

Recording from my office in Beautiful Marietta, Georgia. You are listening to the think inclusive podcast, episode Twenty Three Today we have Nicky Haiman from my creative inclusion.com. We talked about the biggest barriers to inclusive practices in schools today. We also discuss what has been the most effective strategy for helping change educators' mindsets about inclusion. After the podcast, please visit [Patrick.com backslash think inclusive podcast](https://www.patrick.com/backslash-think-inclusive-podcast) where you can support our goal to bring you in depth interviews with inclusive education and community advocacy thought leaders. Also, you can help other people find us like giving us a five star review on apple podcasts or wherever you listen to the thing conclusive podcasts. So without further ado, here is the interview. All right, I'd like to welcome Nicky Haiman inclusive podcast. Thanks for being here and taking the time out to talk with us today.

Nikki Heiman (02:06):

Thank you so much for having me. I'm looking forward to talking to you.

Tim Villegas (02:09):

Yeah, absolutely. Um, so, um, for those of you who are listening who don't know, Nikki's contributed to, uh, uh, the think inclusive website with some fantastic articles. Um, she also is a veteran special education teacher in mom to Trenton who's 14 and a who has down syndrome. Um, she started the blog and my creative inclusion.com. It has fantastic resources on that blog and she's also been very busy providing professional development to educators about increasing their inclusive education practices. She's also a speaker, provides keynote speeches around the United States regarding inclusion and mindset around disability. Um, so what has been new in your world, Nikki?

Nikki Heiman (03:04):

Well, we have been, been there with all the things you listed. Trenton is starting high school this year, which is a big deal. I'm excited and nervous about it both. Um, and I started a new, in addition to, um, my creative inclusion and doing speeches, I started a new position, um, with an education service center and I'm excited about that. I will be, I'm able to work with teachers from all around the state of Kansas, so I'm looking forward to the new challenges that brings as well.

Tim Villegas (03:38):

Awesome. So, uh, so the professional development that you're doing right now, is that part of your particular job, uh, with, uh, your district or the state?

Nikki Heiman (03:50):

Yes, it is. We, the special ed or the education service center that I work for supports over 100 school districts to work with them to provide professional development for staff as well as a lot of other services. But professional development is the area that I'm working with.

Tim Villegas (04:10):

Okay. Um, and just because I'm not sure if we've talked about this before, but in, in the districts that you serve, would you say that the majority of them are inclusively minded or that they are practicing, you know, inclusive practices with fidelity? Or is it something that, um, it, it's still, it's still kind of a work in progress.

Nikki Heiman (04:38):

I think that depends greatly on the school district. I'm in Kansas, we are doing some great things. We have what are called Gemini schools, which are schools that are really working towards changing education. When we have a fantastic commissioner of education who he, I, he is one of the most motivating, inspiring speakers I've ever heard. And he is really motivated to change education and for the better, it's, it's super exciting. Um, we also have a lot of rural schools and we have funding issues in Kansas as like a lot of other states. And so it varies a great deal if there's a building that is well funded than um, inclusive practices are more likely to be followed then one that is constantly cutting just to keep the doors open. So I would say there's a wide range.

Tim Villegas (05:35):

No, it makes sense. From your, I guess, experience in working with schools and educators. Uh, what do you think is the really the biggest barrier to achieve inclusive practices?

Nikki Heiman (05:51):

I would say 100 percent. It's the mindset, it's the mindset of the parents and it's also the mindset of the staff and the teachers working with students. Um, you know, I think, I think the number one thing we need to talk about is moving away from a deficit based approach to special education into a strength based approach. And um, once we get that mindset so that it's not something we have to, um, I'll back up a little bit. So when we're writing the IEP, a lot of times we're thinking about all the things that need to be addressed, all the areas that we have to fill in, the gaps we have to fill in, and that can become overwhelming. I think once we change our mindset and it becomes a habit to first look at, wow, this kid is really good at these things and it's going to be a lot easier to move past those, um, you know, that

really overwhelming feeling of we have all these gaps to fill in. How are we going to get that done within this iep period and instead look at this kid is really talented in these areas. How can we build them up in those areas? Um, I think inclusion will be a lot easier once we start thinking about it in those terms

Tim Villegas (07:04):

is, uh, is that something that we need to work on? Um, as far as the tiers of support? Because I'm, you know, I'm not an expert on Rti at all. Uh, but from what my understanding is that the, there has to be some sort of deficit or, or a discrepancy in the learning in order for students to receive special education services. So how does that work with a strengths base view when this. It seems to me like I say, correct me if I'm wrong, but it's already, it's already leaning toward deficit deficit model.

Nikki Heiman (07:48):

Absolutely. And we can't look at only strange. We obviously have to consider deficits as well, but um, you know, if we think about all you, Trenton for an example, um, his reading is significantly behind his peers, but he is very social and he learned very well from his peers and from conversation and from group work. So, well he may not be able to read a ninth grade text. He can participate with his peers and he can learn very well that way. And I think when we're looking at strength as far as, um, how students learn best, if we put them in situations to make them successful from the beginning, um, that filling the deficit will be a lot of an easier transition, if that makes sense.

Tim Villegas (08:37):

Yeah, yeah. So you talked about mindset. Do you think that that's really the mindsets of the educators to kind of shift from the looking at what a student, all the things that a student can't do a tooth, the things that they can do?

Nikki Heiman (08:58):

I think educators, but also parents, I think we all kind of struggle with that from time to time. Um, because we all get frustrated. I mean nobody's perfect and we're always looking at, oh my gosh, look at all these wonderful things that are happening. Sometimes it's like, why can't we, why can't we just meet this goal, you know, and it can be very frustrating.

Nikki Heiman (09:24):

I'm sorry, Tim, I totally lost my train of thought. I hope you can edit that.

Tim Villegas (09:29):

Yeah, no problem. Yeah, go ahead, take your time.

Nikki Heiman (09:34):

Can you repeat the question for me?

Tim Villegas (09:36):

Um, I was saying about educators, so, um, you talked about mindset and having a, changing a mindset to you more strengths based. Do you feel like, um, since educators are so used to working with deficits and how can I, how can I close the gap for students? Um, I guess what's the best way for educators to change their mindset to a, to a strengths base approach?

Nikki Heiman (10:08):

Okay. That is an excellent question. Um, I think that when we look at how education has been structured over the last years that it has been, you know, we have these standards based assessments and no child left behind where every child is supposed to meet this same idea of mastery, which we know that's not possible. Um, I think moving towards things like project based learning when we think, okay, what could be, what could be a meaningful activity for the student to do in this environment that they're going to be successful? And just I think practicing looking at success and being very metacognitive about it. So instead of looking, okay, well this activity, this is not going to be possible because unless the reasons it's not possible, change the activity so that it is possible. And then just like with students, when we have those positive reinforcing activities that they experienced success as teachers, then we're looking at them and we're like, oh, I can't do this.

Nikki Heiman (11:21):

And they can also do this. Well, this is great, maybe they can do it and the positive build on the positive and that makes you feel better as a teacher though too, you know, when you're seeing all the success rather than to be caught up in the negative of, oh my goodness, we have so much work to do and so little time to do it. It makes teaching a lot more fun when you have that mindset of we just need to restructure the activity and make the students successful and then build on that. And when we build it, we're going to address the deficits.

Tim Villegas (11:56):

Yeah, absolutely. Um, I, I think, uh, you know, coming from coming from the classroom and knowing the pressure that's on, you know, our students are making progress on their goals and objectives. Um, it, it, it, it's, it's easy to, um, to try and focus on filling those gaps as opposed to really looking at the strengths of each individual student a. But from experience, I know that you've had this experience is as well when the students feel like they are able to learn and when they have those positive experiences, um, that just keeps the, it keeps the momentum going. Um, here's a, here's a question that, um, that maybe you can draw on from your experience with, with your son. So, uh, because you mentioned about how he's has some gaps, so how, how have you encouraged him as a parent? Um, when he is given things that are, you know, that are, that are difficult for him. How do you encourage him to kind of keep going and not lose steam? Um, with his education,

Nikki Heiman (13:29):

we break things down for them into this smaller piece that he didn't do. But we've also been very fortunate that we have educators that are willing to adapt. For him. I'm, his favorite activities are all things that he's been in the general ed classroom. And I love being able to tell the teachers that because I think, you know, there's always that nagging, oh gosh, I wish he could do this. This is so much lower than his peers. I don't know if he's getting enough out of it because I'm sorry, um, you know, periodic table that is really hard to learn. And as far as life apple, I don't know how valuable that is, but just this morning we were going through some things in his room and he was so proud of his interactive notebook that he did last year in science class. She was flipping through the pages and you were telling me about things he did all year and finance last year.

Nikki Heiman (14:23):

So, um, I think having, having teachers that are willing to adapt and willing to work with you on breaking things down because we really. I mean if he brought something home that was just impossible, I just

picked up the phone and I called the teacher and said, can we think about how this is how this needs to be restructured so that he's capable of doing it and I'll help them at home of course. But um, I think that relationship between parent and teacher also has to be very positive and supportive because this is a team and we are, you know, working through sometimes uncharted territory.

Tim Villegas (15:01):

Right, right. And it sounds like you've been very fortunate having, like you said, educators who were willing to, you know, baby change up their mindset and in work with your son as far as having him access the curriculum and modifying, modifying it for him. Um, what, what kind of advice would you give to parents who maybe don't have and educators who were either willing or maybe they just don't know how to modify that curriculum?

Nikki Heiman (15:36):

I think those are two very different situations. We actually, um, did we have had situations where I've been teachers they've been unwilling and actually that was the reason we switched schools a couple of years ago, um, and unwilling and Annette, um, and not having the knowledge are two very different things. I'm not having the knowledge or something I think is easy to work with because that's something we can problem solve together as the team but not being willing to is a whole other situation. And um, you know, like I said before, that relationship piece between parent and teacher that has to be there. But, um, you know, you do have least restrictive environment and you do have legal rights and I don't want to, that's never my first avenue for problem solving, but it is something that we do have if we need to,

Tim Villegas (16:34):

right?

Nikki Heiman (16:34):

Illegal acts,

Tim Villegas (16:37):

right? What advice would you give to educators who are willing to, number one, they want to modify the curriculum, maybe a or they want to promote inclusive practices, but maybe they're in a district where that just isn't a priority that's like, you know,

Nikki Heiman (17:06):

that can be hard. Um, but I think as long as you model what you would like to see that you're going to, that you're going to impact some people. And I think we, we're talking about system change. We have to think about, there's always going to be certain hertz, there's gonna be some people that are the early adopters, but look at something new and they think, oh my gosh, this is great. This is the answer to, um, all of my problems. And then there's gonna be another group that says, oh, I don't know. I'm going to need to see you try that first before I jump in and then there's going to be another group that says, no, this is how we've always done it. This is how I'm going to stay, and I think if you're an early adopter and you're wanting spread the excitement of something great like meaningful inclusion and your school, then just continue to model that and model that strength based approach. You know, you have a student who is really struggling model, talking about the strings of course recognize the deficit, but recognize how you're going to address the deficits through the child's strengths and those that are, you

know, they need to watch you do it first. They'll catch on. It might take some time, but they need that. I'm just just their personality that they need that comfort of having seen somebody go before them before they will jump in.

Tim Villegas (18:28):

What do you think is the. When you were talking with teachers, what do you think their biggest, the biggest challenges when providing the professional development? For them,

Nikki Heiman (18:42):

it is hard. If we can get past the mindset piece and we have teachers who are saying, okay, I want to try this, um, I don't know how. And also that juggling piece with you have 20, 30 kids in your room, how do you adopt or adapt for, um, for a few who have significant challenges and that's something that does take teamwork. It takes a lot of collaboration between the Special Ed teacher and the regular Ed teacher and um, and yeah, it takes teamwork and figuring out what works for you. Every team is different.

Tim Villegas (19:21):

Right. Do you have any, um, any tips or strategies for maybe making it work in, in your building? Um, I, I mean, I remember when I was a, when I was a classroom teacher, a in, you know, and I taught in self contained classrooms, um, when I did, I would try in and a buddy up with the general ed teachers and just become friends with them. It's just so that I would kind of include myself in my building and develop those relationships so that when they saw my kids or when we, I wanted to do some sort of coteaching lesson with them, they, they had a relationship with me on a already. Do you have any more kind of strategies for maybe teachers who were in that particular situation?

Nikki Heiman (20:17):

I agree, yes. That relationship piece is really important. Um, time is often centered challenge. There's rarely a time in the day where you can meet and neither one of you have kids. So I made a point to meet with every feature and we scheduled a time but the very beginning of the year that I would meet with each one of them weekly and just check in on how things were doing. If they needed me to help them modify something or um, if there were behavior challenges we need to through. So that way I knew that I always met with. I met with the kindergarten staff on Mondays and I met with first grade on Tuesdays and we just sort of, as long as it was on the calendar, the meeting happened. If it saves, it wasn't only calendar, it was really easy to go extended time periods without touching base. And I think that relationship and consistent communication are key to making it work.

Tim Villegas (21:13):

Fantastic. Um, what, uh, what else is on your mind as far as just inclusion in general, either for your son or just when you're looking at the educational landscape?

Nikki Heiman (21:32):

Well, I'm, I'm in Kansas and we are, we really do have some great things that we're talking about and working through here. I don't know about other states, um, as much in depth, but um, what's Trenton entering high school, he's got some really cool things and, and it's, it's that mindset piece that I think we're finally getting there. And so many places we have gotten individual plans of study for every student in high school, Iep or not. And so every kid is thinking about what do I want to do when I graduate high school? What classes do I need to get there? And Trenton has actually two career paths

that we've picked for him. I'm with him, I don't want to say for him because he felt really went to um, older course ranch. Um, and so we're working on how much money that actually cakes and mom and dad don't have that much, so he has this beautiful picture that he picked out on line and it is probably a \$6,000,000 horse ranch and that is what he wants

Tim Villegas (22:38):
to do. We're working

Nikki Heiman (22:40):
through that. But anyway, he also is very interested in babies and he loves to go to the nursing home. And so he had one path is um, family sciences. So He's taking classes on child development and things like that. And then his own path is in agronomy because he's very interested in animals and horses and we kind of talked to him about, you know, he doesn't want to live with us after he graduates, which is great. We support that. Um, uh, we talked about to have a job and he actually started his own business this summer with a friend of his that also has down's syndrome. They were selling snow cones together and that was a great opportunity for him to learn some entrepreneurship skills and, you know, all of his friends have jobs, so we felt like it was perfectly appropriate for him to start working. And um, I just love that when we're talking about individual plans of study, Trenton's world is not necessarily different from all of his peers. They all have career paths that they chose when entering high school. So, um, we didn't really have to do anything different. Of course the curriculum is not modified, but I just love how it wasn't different at enrollment.

Tim Villegas (24:03):
Yeah. And that's how it should. That's awesome. I love that. Um, well good luck to Trenton with his high school, his high school career as a, as he gets gets into that. Um, I want to make sure people know where to find you. So, uh, are you on twitter, instagram, facebook, and all that?

Nikki Heiman (24:30):
Yes, I am at creative inclusion on instagram and at Hyman Nikki on twitter and I am creative inclusion on facebook.

Tim Villegas (24:42):
Fantastic. Alright, well I want to thank, uh, Nicky Haiman for being on the sink inclusive podcast. Thank you for your time.

Nikki Heiman (24:52):
Thank you, Tim.

Tim Villegas (24:55):
That is our show. We would like to take nicky Haiman for being a guest on the think inclusive podcast. Make sure to follow her on twitter and facebook and look for her work on my creative, including [inaudible] dot com. Follow think inclusive on the web@thinkinclusive.us as well as twitter, facebook, Google plus, and instagram. Today's show was produced by myself using an sm 58 USB logitech headset, zoom h one handy recorder, Mac book pro, Garageband, any skype account you can also subscribe to the podcast via apple podcasts, Google play, stitcher, or anchor dot FM. The easiest way to start a

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