

## Inclusion in Private Preschool

**FDEI** [00:00:03] I have Courtney O'Grady with us so she can share her experiences with inclusion in a Catholic preschool setting. So good morning.

**Courtney** [00:00:11] Good morning. Thank you for having me. I'm excited to share my experiences.

**FDEI** [00:00:15] Great. So why don't you just introduce yourself and who you are and what your background is and then we can get started.

**Courtney** [00:00:22] Sure. So, hello, I'm Courtney O'Grady and I'm a doctoral student focusing on early childhood special education at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. And like Robyn mentioned, I was a preschool teacher in a Catholic school for six years. And it was a great experience.

**FDEI** [00:00:37] Yeah. Good. Wow. So, six years you spent teaching preschool in Catholic setting, right? Well, you have a great deal of experience in that realm. So that's great. So, tell us a little bit about those experiences in that inclusive preschool classroom in a private parochial school. And what did you like best about teaching in that setting? And what were you passionate about in that setting?

**Courtney** [00:01:00] Sure. So, I got started with, my background is all early childhood. So, my bachelor's degree is in early childhood and my master's degree is in early childhood special education. And so, after completing my masters, I taught for four years at a University Lab School and then had my two boys and I was a stay at home mom with my two boys. And then we had kind of an interesting experience with my older son when he was in preschool. We had him in our local Catholic school and it was not as inclusive as we would have maybe hoped. And we reached the decision kind of in conjunction with the school, that it was just not a good fit for our son. And so, we transferred him to the public school. But in, throughout that kind of process, I thought, well, here I am sitting on this early childhood special ed degree. And here's this clear need for a setting to have some, to be more, you know, there's an opportunity for schools to become more inclusive if they have teachers with the passion and experience and education to maybe do that. So, I started looking just kind of casually for positions in a Catholic school and found one almost immediately. That was an ideal position. It was close to home. It started out part time. It was just a really good fit. And so, I ended up there and loved it. And so, it was, it didn't start out super inclusive, but then word kind of got out that there was this preschool teacher who had a special ed background and then we were able to become more inclusive while I was there.

**FDEI** [00:02:35] So the whole school was able to become?

**Courtney** [00:02:37] Well. The whole school was more inclusive in the older grades because they did have, and one thing that made a huge difference in that particular setting is that they had a Response to Intervention and student success team. So, there was always support staff for the older kids. And then I think, it was part, it wasn't just me. It was just kind of the overall culture of the school was the desire to be inclusive and welcoming to a wider range of students.

**FDEI** [00:03:06] Wow. Well, that's I mean, that had to have felt rewarding to be able to kind of move that then into those early years with their program there and to be a part of that.

**Courtney** [00:03:15] Yeah, it was really exciting.

**FDEI** [00:03:16] That's great. Great. So what specific strategies have you used to support kind of these pillars of inclusion in that kind of setting?

**Courtney** [00:03:25] I think the main thing is just to start out with an open attitude about being inclusive. I think certainly there are students whose needs we could not meet, you know. And so it's not that you can be open to any kind of need or student, but to be open to the ones whose needs you can meet with slight modification, with modifications and supports that we could put in place in the classroom. So, one thing that was hard is that we didn't have provisional or related service provision, so we didn't have an in-house OT, PT, things like that. So those needs were harder to meet, although actually while I was there, they did. The school did partner with an agency that could provide speech therapy in-house and then parents had to pay for it privately through insurance and things like that. So, we did have speech.

**FDEI** [00:04:17] OK.

**Courtney** [00:04:18] And then.

**FDEI** [00:04:19] So parents, if they were able to line that up with their insurance with this provider, that that provider could come to the school for the preschool kiddos who needed those services. So, I mean, that and that is an advantage for families. That could be right. That then they don't necessarily have to take off work to take their child to an appointment. You don't fight for those 3 o'clock slots.

**Courtney** [00:04:39] Right.

**FDEI** [00:04:40] Partnership can happen and then if it works with your insurance. It's not perfect, but.

**Courtney** [00:04:44] Right. Right. But still, it allows an opportunity to be in a setting that otherwise might not be able to.

**FDEI** [00:04:51] Right.

**Courtney** [00:04:51] And so and then I just did a lot of supports within the classroom. Some things like being very careful about how you arrange the environment. Being very intentional about the environment. Using a lot of visuals, having a picture schedule. Trying to be flexible so that I would meet the needs of my individual group of students year to year so that, and I used an emergent curriculum so I didn't do the same. It wasn't like a set thing or a prescribed thing that, I had the flexibility to adjust to meet, to base things off at the children's interests and things like, you know, and you to use that as a motivator. If there was a child that I knew wanted to work, needed to work on fine motor skills, and they were really interested in, say, cars that we might rubber band a car to a crayon or whatever, you know, to try to get them to come over to the writing table and things like that. We also, we had, it was a play-based program, not as much academic focus, which I think allowed for greater opportunity for student success because it wasn't like I had set goals academically for the class wide, it was more individual goals, and I also should preface that I taught the three-year olds.

**FDEI** [00:06:03] OK.

**Courtney** [00:06:04] So that helped too, that, you know, I wanted to.

**FDEI** [00:06:07] So that would be the first year in the program, right?

**Courtney** [00:06:09] Right.

**Courtney** [00:06:10] So that helped. I was big on using a lot of social and emotional supports. So, we had things like a solution kit, so that, a friendship kit, again paired with visuals and concrete tools. And there was a lot of intentional direct instruction on social emotional supports. Lots of communication and engagement with families. That was something that was really important to build those relationships with parents and to partner with parents from the beginning. Because my main goal as an early childhood educator was to make that first school year experience just as overwhelmingly positive as possible for the student, for their family. For other students, for our, and to really build a classroom community. And so that was, I think, something that is really essential to being inclusive is to establish that sense of classroom community. And then every student is a member of that, a valued member, a crucial member of that classroom community. So, I really tried to be intentional with that and did things like had a beginning of the year picnic just for the families at a local park. So, kind of off campus, but allowing, and at night, so allowing families to kind of get to know each other and that too it as I think something that kind of set our setting apart and that I really appreciated about being in that setting is that it was part of this larger, the preschool is part of this larger community. You know, it was a preschool through eighth grade school. Yeah. So also, not just welcoming the students and families to this micro community, but welcoming them to the larger community too.

**FDEI** [00:07:50] You know that makes me think of something that I talked with Natalie Danner about, and there's a, there's an audio interview available on the website for people to listen to if they haven't. And she's, but she talked about Montessori and the kind of in relation to community and how kids it's multi age settings right into how kids then are helping one another and older kids leading another and more like kind of that family dynamic. And one of the things that jumped out at me in that kind of was jumping out here, too, is that when you are in in an inclusive setting and you're doing all these things and you're fostering this community. It's got to help to diminish the kind of othering that happens or that can happen for children of any, be it, you know, other in terms of, you know, however, they would be defined as other. Right. We know there's these kinds of ways that we other people, right. And so, one of the things that struck me was that I wonder if in the Montessori setting that multi age helps to diminish that. As well as then in this setting that you're describing, creating that culture and community of inclusion helps to limit the othering that happens across the board. Did you experience anything that you felt, you saw that kids were, you know, really, really connecting and bonding to each other as a result of kind of some of the strategies you were using?

**Courtney** [00:09:16] Oh, absolutely, absolutely. And I would have social stories is another thing that I would use. I had a student that needed extra support with transitions and it got to the point where other students would go and grab it for him. And it was just, you know, we never made a big deal. I mean, every almost every student had something that they needed, something that they were working on, whether it was because of a disability, because of a, I had a lot of English language learners. I had students with, you know, that had experienced trauma and had stuff going on. I mean, everybody came to the table

needing something. Or even, you know, the need of being a three-year-old away from your mom for the first time. You know that everybody needed something.

**FDEI** [00:09:57] Yeah.

**Courtney** [00:09:57] So I think that was just part of the flow of the room is that, you know, this is what so-and-so needs, this is what so-and-so needs. This is just.

**FDEI** [00:10:06] Yeah. And that can be really helpful because again, then you're defining this concept as fair as everyone getting what they need, which is a big shift for kids, but really makes sense to them is what I've discovered. Even years ago, as a classroom teacher and as a mom, you know, if I if my kids are stomping their feet about it, I simply say, well, but are you getting what you need? Right. And that's kind of what you're describing that you were working to create. So that's really that's very, very exciting. And the other thing I noticed as you talk is that it sounds as though the things that you were doing to promote inclusion and to include children with disabilities and other needs are things that are good for all kids.

**Courtney** [00:10:43] Exactly. Exactly. Like the visual schedule, that's something that benefited my students, that had a hard time with transitioning so that they always knew, you know, this is what we're doing. This is what's coming. They would usually be the one whose job it was to move the clip down, you know, and kind of keep, you know, be our schedule keeper or whatever. But it benefited everybody. And you'd have, you know, other students that would be saying, oh it's time. You know, I see we're going to gym today or. And it helped the language learners to have those visuals. So those are supports to have in place that really benefit everybody and say, well, with the solution kit that was a support that helped me as the teacher. Because you know, then when you have them able to solve their own problems and to navigate those complex social competencies that really works for everybody.

**FDEI** [00:11:30] Yeah. Yeah. I'm thinking of the schedule is even helpful for somebody who's just really type A. Right?

**Courtney** [00:11:37] Right.

**FDEI** [00:11:37] I walk into something. There's no agenda, no meeting. I'm like, where's the where's the schedule? I want to know, you know? And I I'm just a regular type A person. So, it's helpful for all. So that's really interesting.

**Courtney** [00:11:49] Predictability and consistency was huge. So, we had flexibility in the things that we were doing, but we also had a fairly consistent routine.

**FDEI** [00:11:58] Sure. Yeah.

**Courtney** [00:11:59] And routines within routines within routines. So, you know, you'd have our routine of circle time and in that circle time first we would do this that we would do this, then we would, you know.

**FDEI** [00:12:10] Yeah. And that helps too. Yeah. So what barriers did you or your program face to becoming more inclusive? And what suggestions do you have for others who might be facing similar barriers to creating a community that's more inclusive?

**Courtney** [00:12:28] Yeah. Well, like I said, you know, with the overall goal of it being a really positive and successful experience for everybody, knowing that it just was not an appropriate placement for some students. Actually, that I know of, I don't think we ever had anybody that we had to turn away. But just thinking more broadly, if there was a child with more complex needs, then we would be able to address and provide those related services that it wouldn't necessarily be the most appropriate setting for that student to be successful.

**FDEI** [00:12:59] Right.

**Courtney** [00:13:00] So that would be one potential barrier. But one advice, piece of advice that I would have is just to be open to it and figure out what you, you know, don't focus on what you can't do. You know, that wasn't our mindset, of we cannot take x y z type of kids. It was more who can you know, who can come here, you know, who can we welcome and what can we do so that this child that wants to come, that has this situation going on can be welcomed and included here? What, kind of do some of that front planning through the admission process of what we might, what we could do. And then to to just be more creative in your resources. So, for example, we did not have social workers on staff, but we were able, the school was able to partner with the local university that was kitty corner to the school and have social work interns. So, then it was kind of mutually beneficial for students, then had a guaranteed placement. And then also our students were able to have social work services from eager students.

**FDEI** [00:14:01] Yeah, great. Yeah.

**Courtney** [00:14:03] Anxious and excited to help.

**FDEI** [00:14:05] Right. So, I'm hearing you say, you know, be creative and think about what you can do and navigate other avenues than what, kind of your first response is solutions and find ways to see if you can make it work.

**Courtney** [00:14:19] Yeah, and find you, find your people, find your community. So, I know I can only speak to my experiences in Catholic schools, but I know there are other Catholic educators at other schools at other programs that are also really committed to inclusion. And you know, they're on social media, they're on, so finding those resources and making those connections I think is really important too so that, you know, that you're not, you know, you're not in it alone. And I think it's helpful to find other people that have similar experiences and can walk you through it.

**FDEI** [00:14:48] Right. Yeah. So, kind of in that same vein then what do you have specific programs or recommendations that you would have for either parents and teachers, you know, to support inclusion in a faith-based kind of program or community?

**Courtney** [00:15:04] Well, again, I can only speak to what I know from the Catholic perspective. I know like, for example, the University of Notre Dame has a wonderful program for supporting inclusion. So that's just one example. But I would encourage people to look within their own faith or denomination. And it sounds silly, but just Google.

**FDEI** [00:15:22] Right.

**Courtney** [00:15:22] And start with Google and see, see what's out there. And if there isn't anything, start something. And I bet there, you'll find people quickly.

**FDEI** [00:15:31] Yeah. Yeah. And sometimes it is as kind of, I don't like to use the word basic but as simple or as basic as simply googling and seeing what comes up because I know, as anybody knows, if you Google one thing, you end up in a rabbit trail that then takes you somewhere else, maybe you'll find something. Right. But this program that you're talking about at, you said Notre Dame?

**Courtney** [00:15:51] Yeah.

**FDEI** [00:15:53] Yeah. So, we'll, we'll post the resource to that program and the link to that in the notes below for everyone to be able to access. So, kind of as we wrap. What advice would you, if you could just give kind of one key piece. Right. What advice would you give to programs that are looking to be more inclusive?

**Courtney** [00:16:15] Don't close the door. So, I think that was really hard for us as parents to hear, "We just don't know what to do with your son". That was heartbreaking to us and we really wanted a faith-based education for our son and that choice was taken away from us. So, I am, I'm also a big advocate for public education, now both of my kids are in public school. So, it's not that it's one is better than the other or what, I think it should be a family's choice.

**FDEI** [00:16:41] Sure.

**Courtney** [00:16:41] And bring it back to the parents and what they want for their child. If a family wants a faith-based education for their child, I don't think that door should necessarily be closed. And maybe you're not in a place where you can have the door wide open, but crack it.

**FDEI** [00:16:56] Right. Right. Well, good. Well, thank you again for being here. And we appreciate your time. And again, like I said, you can find resources below the video to the program at Notre Dame as well as other resources that Courtney's shared. So, thank you. Thanks again. Thank you.