



Transcript- Episode 73

When “They Need a Small Group” is Code for Exclusion

Hello everyone and welcome to the Inclusion Podcast Episode 73.

I think this one we need a drum roll. So if you're around, you can just put a drum roll on your desk or your car dashboard. It's fine.

Just be careful. Here's why I think we need a drum roll because we hear it all the time. No, inclusion is great.

It's so good. It's so important. It's right.

It's ethical. It's legal. It's yes.

But there's just some kids that really need a small group. They just need a small group. And I go, oh, okay.

And too often that statement is about, we need to remove them from the General Ed setting in a separate setting or a separate table away from content, curriculum, and peers that are from general education. And in this episode, we're going to unpack this phrase “they just need a small group” because we know that it can really lead to exclusion.

It's a real gateway conversation to say this kid just needs a small group. Now, please know we're going to talk about small groups and how awesome they are. But what people are meaning is, we need a small ability-based group.

And we're saying, no, no, no, friends, small heterogeneous groups all day long in general education, yes. So we're going to talk about how to shift the solution back to where it belongs, which is inside the general education classroom. We're going to talk about station teaching and flexible grouping and universal access points.

And we're going to explore how small group instruction does not have to mean pull out and can and should actually mean necessarily redesigning things in that Tier One general education instruction.

I think, Julie, for me, this is one of those both/ands. You know, like instead of the binary, either we're inclusive and then people are like, in their mind, that means we're throwing them to the wolves or we're going to give them the support they need in this small group where I can just see, like, angels playing harps.

Yes. And I don't think either is the reality, the wolves or the angels. And so the both/and is to put small groups where kids already are.

That's right. Okay. So friends, if you want to get the download for this episode, it might help because Julie and I are going to talk about sort of this repeated cycle of good intention but negative impact.

We're going to highlight again that the research does support small groups and we're not saying small groups in a separate place. So at [inclusiveschooling.com/download73](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download73), you can get sort of a one-stop summary of all the things we're going to hint on. So [inclusiveschooling.com/download73](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download73).

Let's go. Okay. So we're going to rethink about what small group actually means.

So it is code. It is code for something. So when someone says, you know what, this kid would be great in some small group instruction, it is code for "not here".

Yeah. And so we're really talking about a place or a program or a person, not our instruction.

That's right.

That's right. Now, of course, are there exceptions? Yes. Do some people do incredible heterogeneous small groups all the time? Yes.

We're not talking about that. So if that's you, you can skip this episode. If you create small heterogeneous groups all day long and teach really to the diversity in every single group, skip this episode.

Okay. We're talking about when it's called, they need small groups is actually a rationale for exclusion. And we start to think about it, it's there.

People are saying it's about pulling out, pulling to the side, pulling to another room. And so that's where we're looking at. Nope.

We need to redesign that. And Kristie, I love that you said a cycle. And we also say a trap that teams fall into.

So let's talk about this cycle or this trap that we often see in schools related to this argument that the student needs a small group.

Yeah. So let's start with the intention or the noticing or the awareness.

A student is in some way struggling, right? In some way, we want to offer support. Okay. But the trap, as Julie said, is our first move is to use "our code".

The kid needs or would benefit from a small group. We probably even write it in the IEP that the student will benefit from small group instruction, therefore justifying a more restrictive environment. So the student's removed.

The student sometimes, and I'm going to put air quotes, does better. So then the team assumes that the solution was the location or the program or the person in that pulled out place. So then we go, oh, this is a good solution.

So more and more kids, when they start to struggle, we do the same cycle. Let's remove them, put them in a small group, justify it through the IEP, and then we go, okay, you're doing better. Let's go back to the classroom.

Then we see the student gets in there, starts to struggle again, and we're like, oh, darn it. We didn't do enough small group, so we just keep going. And we see the student as the problem, not the setting or the instruction.

So where would you jump in there, Julie, in that cycle that just kind of perpetuates itself? And sometimes, Julie, I would say we don't even give the kid a chance to be removed. We just straight up decide they need a small group, code for a self-contained classroom.

Yeah.

So what that does is it leaves the Tier 1 instruction, the general education instruction, unanalyzed. It leaves that space in place to say, we're fine. This is good.

We're doing good work here. And when you don't fit this work we're doing here, you go elsewhere and you get fixed. And then maybe you can return and maybe you can't.

And what we know to be true is it's against the law to think in these ways. So I'm just going to say it in a really straightforward way. Under a least restrictive environment, the first go-to should NOT be to change the environment.

The first go-to should be all the supplemental aids, supports, and services that we provide in the general education setting. That's what we want to exhaust. That's what we want to spend our time and energy on, not making a quick fix small group.

Because as Kristie said, then that General Ed setting is left untouched. And when kids struggle, which they will, which they will, then exclusion is the solution instead of changing up the general education instruction, the supplemental aids, supports, and services, the differentiation, the UDL, the grouping inside the general education classes. That's where we want to spend our time and energy, not with a quick eject button.

So Julie, for me, that what you all, what you said, there were so many highlights. And so I'm going to go back into the transcript myself and kind of pull out some of those myths, or as you said earlier, traps, like traps in my thinking. So I'm really resonating with this idea of small groups is just an instructional strategy.

And I really need to think about, you often invite people to say what's different about that other room or what's different about the small group or what's so unique about it. And once people articulate what's happening, it's really the core of things like differentiation or relationships or offering choices, meeting the kid where they are. And then you always say to people, are those things that are unique to that room in the building? Can we not differentiate over here? Can we not offer choices over here? And then people have to get honest and say, oh yes, that Gen Ed teacher isn't going to differentiate or isn't going to offer that level of choice.

Oh, that seems to be a different problem than the kid. It's like, we have to expect variability in the human child. We have to expect it and we have to celebrate it.

And we have to notice it and we have to prepare for it. But when we exclude for variability in, learning variability in communication, variability in neurological processing.

Yeah. Neurological processing, neurological. Thinking neuro, every aspect of neurology.

And we just start to sort and separate by that. What we're doing is we're not changing the core that's needed. If the improvement only exists when the student is pulled out, then pull out is doing the regulating, not the student.

So the other aspect that we have to find is it is possible that a student does better quote unquote in a quiet environment...sometimes... cool. Then put quiet environments in that General Ed setting.

We figure out how to make those portable services brought into the General Ed instead of bringing kids out for those services. Well, and Julie, I'm going to hear like what people are thinking, right? When you said that, and then I'm going to return to our download for this episode.

When you said, okay, then make quiet spots, or options, or opportunities, I guess, moments in the Gen Ed classroom or within the Gen Ed curriculum, and I could see people literally eye rolling, like, you know, how, when there's 32 kids in here, blah, blah, blah.

And so what I love about the download. There's this one tip I was reading earlier today that I was like, oh, I love this one. So it's called Think Pair and Share.

And it says include writing before speaking. Now our reason for putting that was to promote engagement without verbal demand, which we'll come back to. But just right then, Julie, I thought, okay, when I imagined in my mind creating, it's like, all of a sudden I'm like, how am I going to keep 32 kids quiet? Instead of, oh my gosh, when I do a Think Pair Share and everybody writes for a minute or just reflects in their mind for a literal minute before doing the turn and talk or before doing the action, I have just built in quiet.

Yeah. And so it's like, oh that's the both and right? It doesn't mean out of a 42 minute calculus lesson, I have to spend 30 minutes in meditation.

No, it's one minute of thinking before I assign people to go and work as a cooperative learning group.

That's right. That's right.

So all of these things are built in. I mean, we could do, I mean, I could ask anyone listening to this podcast. If your task was to think of a hundred ways to build in silence and reflection time in a general education setting, I bet you, you could do it.

Yeah. But it's just about where we're putting our time and energy to. So some people go, well, okay, that's cool, but why not send them down the hall where the room is quiet? And I have to say several things because research shows that when you send kids out of General Ed, they don't learn to regulate.

They learn to, they learn to leave and then they miss the content. And so this isn't just like, about a preference. This is to say, you don't want groups of kids with disabilities leaving a classroom.

You want folks staying and you want the regulation strategies and skills to happen in the classroom. So that's the goal. So why would we keep practicing it in the wrong way?

All right. So let's make sure they get that download. And then I love that challenge. I'm going to try to do it myself.

You said a hundred ways to build in silence and reflection. So I hope that when people listen to this, they will generate even five ways and email us or share on social media, what you came up with or what you're already doing. Like just notice that you're already doing this.

So again, the idea that started this conversation or this challenge is the download for this episode. So at [inclusiveschooling.com/download73](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download73), you will get our handout that's titled "Let's Rethink What "Small Group" Really Means". And you'll see the cycle.

And then you'll see what research and experts are saying about it. So I'm going to give you a couple of ways to design effective small group instruction without having to have more adults, without getting into that trap.

And I just picked number 11 of the 25, but Julie, I'm guessing you'd like to pick another couple or two before we wrap up this session. I'd love to do interest-based stations. I just, my, I went to that number two.

And so no matter what you're teaching, you can still set up small groups based on student choice, and so whatever the concept is that you're teaching, let's say it's multiplication and you're doing a simple multiplication activity, and over here kids are drawing the multiplication problems out, kids over here are creating the multiplication problems with manipulatives, students over here are figuring out how to create a video that would describe or show the multiplication problems, right?

And so what kids are doing is not thinking where do I struggle, but they're thinking where do I shine, where am I interested, and how do I do this in the best way that suits me? So that's just a quick and easy way to say we love small groups, but please never say that this kid is the only kid that needs a small group because all humans need small groups done heterogeneously and not done in segregated, separated ways, by deficit disorder or disability.

I just have to do a quick side note, in all the examples you just gave JC, nobody was in a group doing a worksheet when they were working on their math problem.

Amen, although Kristie, you would probably love that work.

I would probably love it because it has a start and a finish. Yeah, I'm probably gonna get a hundred percent and a smiley face for my teacher.

Yeah yeah, and so I love that, you're right, so it changes the way that we think about what typical instruction looks like, what typical output looks like, we're not handing out 33 of the same worksheet and going, "oh no what do we do?" because lots of kids don't enjoy this task.

Now Kristie, you can pick the worksheet and you can time yourself, and you can race yourself, and you can see if you can get faster. Go for it, right? That might be good for a student like Kristie.

Perfect, but it's not good for a student like Julie who would instead rather make a stop-motion animation film about how to make multiplication real in people's minds so they can understand what they're doing with numbers.

Like, that for me would be yes, let's do it. So we have to have choice based on student interest, not deficit disorder, okay? So I'm gonna pick number eight, we still have enough time to do a couple more. Okay number eight is success checklist. Now we have another whole podcast episode- in fact a couple of them- about success minutes so I won't go into that, but what I like about the number eight is to have students identify what a successful group task looks like.

Sometimes I think we know those are, let me finish that thought, sometimes we don't give students enough credit to take the lead to speak up or advocate for their learning needs, then some kids might be really young or not aware of or we've conditioned them not to notice what they need because we've told them that's not allowed here or there's not time for that right now.

So maybe I would be really creative in making an animated film, but no one has ever suggested that creativity is a value. It's like, finish this worksheet and get a star and a smiling face from your teacher, right? Like I was conditioned to do that, so what I like about this is, having students identify that someone might say I don't like working that way.

Well I'll give them the dance example, Julie. When we're West Coast swinging, we're working in small groups but we have to rotate. So like, we try to move and then we rotate and we have a different leader. I'm a follower and then we do the move again, and then we rotate, and sometimes I'm like, "hey can we just stay with the same partner for a minute?". Because rotating makes me have to adjust not only to learn the content, but to the new person, or I may not like that person, I may love that person, I just want to dance with them for one more minute. So if you ask me, my feedback would be, can we rotate less often or maybe we never rotate? So all year I'm stuck at the orange table and at the orange table we don't click but I'm with them for the entire year.

That's right, that's right, and so you'll notice in this handout that we have ways to design effective small group instruction and so you know, Kristie, what you're talking about is all the design of the small group.

And so my favorite one that's in here is student choice grouping, and what we love is this concept of pig grouping. Meaning, you can have students work as a partner, as an individual, or as a group, because on Thursday at 2 o'clock when I have a headache and I'm sick and tired of being in this classroom, I might want to work by myself. And given that choice, it would really help settle my nervous system. And so some of this is to say, hey what's magic about small groups? And then to say, when isn't it magic, and how do we make it more flexible for the learner, driven by the learner, determined by the learner in each and every case? So we've got lots and lots of ideas for you.

So I think you're gonna want to grab this download, and I think we want you to think about this larger issue of this concept called “they just need small group instruction” and let's look at that what does it actually mean and how can we make sure that we're being highly inclusive in the ways that we provide supports to students who need it.

SHOW NOTES

What This Episode Is About

In this episode, Julie and Kristie unpack one of the most common phrases used in schools, and one of the most misunderstood.

“We love inclusion, but this student really needs a small group.”

While small group instruction is a powerful and evidence-based teaching strategy, it is often used as a justification for removing students from general education classrooms.

The problem?

Small group instruction is a strategy... not a location.

Key Takeaways

- Small group instruction is not a place, it is an instructional strategy.
- Students do not need to leave general education classrooms to benefit from small groups.
- Pull-out services often become the default solution before Tier 1 instruction is fully examined.
- When students only succeed outside the classroom, the environment, not the student, may need redesigning.
- Flexible, heterogeneous grouping benefits all learners.
- The first response to student struggle should be improving access and instruction, not changing placement.

Answering a Common Question

Do students with disabilities need small group instruction? Yes.

But needing small group instruction does **not** mean needing a separate classroom or space.

Effective small groups can happen:

- Inside general education classrooms
- During station teaching
- Through flexible grouping
- Through peer collaboration
- Through interest-based activities
- Through differentiated instruction

Many schools unintentionally follow this cycle:

1. A student struggles in class.
2. The student is removed for "small group instruction."
3. The student appears to do better.
4. The team assumes the pull-out setting is the solution.
5. More pull-out support is added.
6. The general education classroom remains unchanged.
7. The student becomes viewed as the problem rather than the instructional environment.

Over time, exclusion grows while instructional redesign never happens.

Episode Download / Handout

Let's Rethink What Small Group Really Means - This practical guide helps educators redesign support **without removing students from instruction, peers, or belonging**.

Inside the download, you'll find:

- A visual of the common "small group" trap schools fall into
- Research-based principles for effective small group instruction
- 25 practical ways to create meaningful small groups inside general education classrooms
- Strategies that do not require additional staff
- Ideas for increasing engagement, regulation, and participation
- Flexible grouping structures that support all learners

👉 Download at: [inclusiveschooling.com/download73](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download73)

What Instructional Experts Know About Effective Small Groups

Effective small group instruction:

- Uses flexible and temporary groups
 - Includes diverse learners
 - Builds student choice and ownership
 - Supports participation in multiple ways
 - Preserves access to peers and grade-level content
 - Relies on intentional design rather than additional adults
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Practical Ways to Create Small Groups Without Pull-Out

Instead of removing students, try:

- **Student Choice Grouping** – Let students choose partners or groups.
 - **Interest-Based Stations** – Group students around interests and strengths.
 - **Think-Pair-Share** – Include writing before speaking to increase participation.
 - **Success Checklists** – Have students define what successful collaboration looks like.
 - **Clock Partners** – Create diverse partner groupings ahead of time.
 - **Station Teaching** – Build supports directly into instruction.
 - **Choice Boards** – Offer multiple ways to engage with content.
 - **Partner, Individual, Group (PIG) Options** – Let students choose how they work.
 - **Visual Schedules and Role Cards** – Reduce adult prompting and increase independence.
 - **Cozy Corners and Regulation Supports** – Help students regulate without leaving the classroom.
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