



Episode #172:

**Understanding and Navigating
the Parent-Teacher Relationship**

August 27, 2019

Debbie: Thank you so much for talking with us today. So as a way to start our conversation, would you mind telling us a little bit about where and what you teach and what the focus of your school is?

Becca: Yes. So I teach second grade at Claxton Elementary School, which is in Asheville, North Carolina, and my school is an inclusion school. So what that means is that students who are identified as having disabilities or as gifted and talented are all included in a general education classroom along with their peers of the same age. And those students are provided with the necessary support or accommodations and modifications needed to best fit their educational needs. So in my classroom, I have a variety of students who learn in different ways and we all work together and are with each other for the majority of the school day. And so it's really great to see everyone appreciating each other's own unique gifts and talents.

Debbie: How many kids do you have in your classroom?

Becca: I have twenty students, so I'm pretty lucky to have such a small class size. Typically I will have about four or five students who are identified as having some type of disability or identified as learning differently than their peers. So can be up to a quarter of the class.

Debbie: And is it just you in the classroom or do you have an assistant working with you?

Becca: I'm very fortunate because I do have an assistant. Most second grade classes in my state and I believe across the nation do not have assistants. But I do have one, which makes a huge difference. It allows me to provide small group instruction for the majority of the day to really help meet the needs of all my students.

Debbie: I'm very curious about this idea of an inclusion school. In the Netherlands, I know they believe in inclusion education in theory. But in practice, it doesn't always work out that way and often times kids who are differently wired or learn in different ways have a hard time find a school to accept them and support them. What's your experience been...does it work?

Becca: In my experience, inclusion education is very important and it works as long as the support is provided. And what I mean by that is that students who learn differently may need the extra support of another adult working with them one-on-one or in a small group setting, and it will be a teacher who is licensed in special education. So

that's different from having an instructional assistant or a teacher assistant like I have. It would be an adult who is actually licensed in special education to come in and support students who may be learning differently than their peers. And I'm grateful that in my school we have a lot of a lot of support in that area, and so that may look different from school to school and district to district and state to state and country to country. But in my school, I've had a positive experience. It's been awesome to teach so many different types of learners and it's helped me become a better teacher as well, because I've had to form my instruction based on the way my kids respond to what I'm teaching. So it's my job as a teacher to constantly be aware of how my students are responding.

As part of this, I have to do formative assessments all day long, which means that I'm using observation and anecdotal notes to see what my students are retaining and what they may need more support with. Or if I realize my teaching approach isn't working and a small group of my students or one or two of my students isn't learning, then I have to change my approach to meet them where they're at.

So any inclusion model does take a lot of work because it's kind of like I'm teaching twenty individual lessons versus one lesson to twenty students because every single student is going to need something a little different. And the way that I provide that differentiation will look different for every subject and every day. But though it takes more work, I think it's worth it in the long run, especially for everybody to be included together and learn from each other and their unique learning styles.

I might have students who are more talented when it comes to drawing or building or creating, and although they may be identified by the laws as having a disability, they have this unique gift that can be shared with their peers. So really an inclusion model is about seeing those unique gifts and talents in *every* student and using it to everyone's advantage so we can all learn from each other.

Debbie: I love that, because so often the focus of conversations surrounding inclusion education is on the benefit for the student with the difference. But it really is about how *everyone* can benefit, not just the differently-wired student or the child with a learning difference. It goes both ways.

Becca: Definitely! And even as a teacher, I've had kids present their own learning to me in such a unique way that it's changed my perspective. And I've learned from them and thought about ways to use it in the future for other students. At the end of the day, the classroom is a community—we're all learning from each other, the teachers *and* the students.

Debbie: I know you can't talk specifically about what's happening in your classroom this year, but generally speaking, what are some of the neurological differences you've had to address and support in your students?

Becca: I've taught students with autism, students with ADHD... I've had the opportunity to get to know so many different kinds of learners. Really, every single kid learns in their own unique way. I've enjoyed working with all my different types of students.

Debbie: I'm sure it keeps things interesting! When you were studying to become a teacher, were you specifically trained in learning how to support students who think differently? I recently [interviewed someone about dyslexia](#) who had taught for more than fifteen years and then went on to get her master's degree as a reading specialist, and in none of that time was she trained to even understand what dyslexia was. So, I'm curious to know, in the course of your training, whether in university or otherwise, have you learned specific skills to support differently-wired kids?

Becca: That's such a great question. I went to the University of North Carolina at Asheville and I did take several classes that were specifically on students with special needs or different learning styles. And I also majored in psychology, so I took psychology of exceptional children and I've had the opportunity to explore that area. Not every university will provide the same courses, but general education students in college will learn about exceptional children. I have been able to explore that area and it's something I may want to explore more in the future.

Debbie: Is special education becoming a special interest of yours as a result of working with the differently-wired kids in your classroom?

Becca: I've always been very intrigued by children who learn differently from their peers. And after my three years of teaching, I've come to love those students. It's so interesting to see the world through their eyes. And like I said earlier, there have been times where students will show me something in a way I never thought of before. Now I'm learning from them just like they're learning from me.

Debbie: I love that. And they're obviously lucky to have you as a teacher with that kind of open mindedness and the willingness to see the gifts in thinking differently. It's not something every teacher is able to do—it's so exciting when teachers are able to appreciate and enjoy different ways of seeing the world and approaching school.

Becca: And that's why support it's so important in the school as well. I can say honestly that if it was just me in my classroom without any support coming in, then it would be very difficult. And so it's important that teachers are provided with the support they need to be able to give students the support *they* need.

Debbie: Absolutely. I'm sure every teacher listening to this is nodding her head vigorously.

I know that a lot of parents of differently-wired kids, and this was definitely the case with my husband and me, have a “tricky” relationship with their child’s teacher. Asher’s last year in traditional school before we pulled him out to homeschool was the year he was in second grade. He was in a public school with an IEP and a fantastic young teacher who worked really hard to try and help Asher be successful in the classroom. But I was the parent who did all the volunteering and meetings and handled all the phone calls and the emails and I spent *a lot* of time working with this teacher. There was a lot of back and forth communication, often *daily* communication, where we would check in on Asher’s behavioral support system, and to see if he earned his points for the day. And then of course there were school pick-ups, and depending on what had happened that day, I’d either get an excited smile with a thumbs up or more often than not, a deer-in-headlights expression. On the really bad days his teacher would ask if I had a few minutes to talk.

So all that to say that the relationship between a parent and a teacher can be a tricky one. I know how tough that was from my perspective, and I also was always trying to understand and empathize with the teacher’s perspective.

I’d love to hear from *your* perspective what those relationships are like when you have a child in your class who needs extra support. How do you manage that relationship with the parent? What are your goals in that relationship?

Becca: I would say for all of my parents, communication and building relationships is by far the most important piece of my school year, especially for parents of students who are exceptional learners because they have specific behavioral, academic, and social goals. And we have to work together as a team in order for that child to show growth. And the only way for us to work successfully as a team is to build those relationships. So a couple of ways I do that at my school is do home visits at the beginning of the school year. At the beginning of the year, I ask my parents if they would like me to come over and visit in their home. I’m happy to do that. Some parents are not so into it, but the majority are and it’s such a great way get to know each other and the kids are excited to be able to share their own life—their favorite toys or their favorite books at home or what they like to do. And so I would say that’s one of the ways that I start out the beginning of the year with building that strong foundation.

Then, it’s important to keep consistent communication. I’ve had some parents in years past where I was communicating with them every single day, whether that’s through email or a phone call or even a text message. It’s so important for us to all be on the same page.

And along with communication comes honesty, which may not always be easy for the teacher *or* the parent, because there may be times where I don't want to share something because I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings, or I don't want anybody to feel bad about something that's happened. But the only way that we can do what's best for the child and the only way that a child can continue to show growth is if there is honesty about what's going on in the classroom. And oftentimes kids will behave differently at home than they do at school and that's because at school they're having to do different tasks than at home.

So a second way I help parents see what our routine is is I invite them to spend a day in the classroom. And every time I've had a parent do that, it's been such a positive experience for the parent, the child, and me. As a teacher, it gives me good talking points for where we can go back and look at that school day and say, you know, when this happened, how do you feel about how I handle that or how would you handle that at home or do you think there's a different way that maybe your child would respond better to?

Being open and honest has to be the basis of that teamwork. And I'm grateful that I work in a district that allows that. So I would encourage parents to reach out to the classroom teacher and ask if it's possible for them to come spend the day with the class or even part of the day. I think more than likely teachers would be happy to have them. And I think it would be a great experience for everyone.

Debbie: When Asher was in first grade and he was in a private school, we knew we were going to be transitioning to a public school. And as part of the process of getting him his IEP, someone had to sit in the classroom and observe him and take notes on his behavior and actions in the classroom. So while I didn't get to observe, this other person did, and her notes were like a play-by-play of everything he did over the course of an hour. And it was absolutely fascinating to me because it was like a window into a world I had no idea existed. As parents, we do only see what we see at home and, you're right—the environment in school is different. And I could see how eye opening that could be for a parent to get a better sense of what's really going on.

Becca: Yeah, definitely. And I really do love looking back on that visit day and having those discussions with parents and asking them their opinion. Because as the parent, you know your child best. I love hearing the parents' perspective. I've had some parents come in more than once at different points in the year, which is also great because kids change so much during different times of the school year. So depending on when there are school breaks or if there's a long holiday break, or of course behaviors can be drastically different from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.

Debbie: Earlier you said you could learn a lot from parents. As a parent, I tried to support the teachers, you know, telling them what we're doing at home...here are the therapies we're doing...here are our strategies. So a lot of my job was educating the teacher on Asher strategies. But at the same time, I remember feeling sometimes like I wanted them to tell *me* what to do and how to help Asher. Have you had parents who've looked at you to be that beacon of information or to give them strategies because their child is thriving in your classroom and they want to bring that home as well?

Becca: Debbie, I think so many parents feel the same way you do. And I think so many teachers feel this way as well. We want to know as much as we can from the parents about what's working at home or things that are going on at home or any additional information that we should know. We want to soak it all up. And then of course parents want to know what's going on at school and how can how can things be applied at home. So it is kind of a cycle of learning from each other. And that's why that communication and those constant discussions are important because teachers and parents are learning from each other. For example, there are some things I use successfully in the classroom, such as a checklist of tasks, that parents may also try at home. And that way the child is having consistency across the whole day. They're thinking, *okay, I've seen the same thing in school and at home*. It's important for them to have consistency.

I can't stress enough the importance of the teamwork aspect in the parent teacher dynamic and finding answers together. There have been times where parents will have questions or maybe we'll both have a question about something, so I'll reach out to support staff at school to try to find the answer, while parents may try to find an answer outside of school by doing a different kind of research. And then we get back together and discuss what we found and find a common ground of what's best.

Debbie: It seems that first and second grade are the years when parents discover their child might be differently wired, because up until that point, some of their behavior may have seemed appropriate. Perhaps immature developmentally, but still within the range of "normal" behavior. But as was the case with us, and I've seen this with so many other families, first and second grade are when the behavior of some kids really starts to stand out. As a teacher, does this happen to you? It seems like going into a school year you kind of know who your kids are with different needs, but has it happened where you've been teaching and *you've* been the one to bring it to others' attention that something might be going on with a child that needs to be assessed?

Becca: Yes, definitely. As you said, first and second grade are pivotal years and, yes, in my experience, most kids are typically identified in these years. And that's when the IEP is put in place. But most schools have, or *should* have, good systems in place so the classroom teacher feels comfortable reaching out to the right people if they do notice things that are atypical or, along the same lines, if parents have concerns.

Debbie: What would your advice be to parents who have concerns about what's going on with their child at school, whether it's academic or social? How do you suggest they approach a school or teacher in order to advocate for their child?

Becca: I would say that the most important thing is to reach out sooner rather than later. Because even though it may be a minor concern—maybe a parent is noticing something and they're not sure if it's a big deal or not, I would still bring it to the teacher's attention. And in that way, it can be on my radar as well. And hopefully parents will feel comfortable doing that. I know that as a classroom teacher for me there would be no judgment there. I'm so happy when parents are open and honest. So I would say to reach out sooner rather than later through email or phone or whatever is best and just be honest about what you're seeing or what you're concerned about and what you've noticed at home. And then also feel free to ask questions.

I would also say it's important to set up a face-to-face meeting because things can be interpreted differently over the phone. That's also a great way for the teacher to show the classroom environment to the parent through the lens of their child. So definitely reaching out sooner rather than later and hopefully feeling comfortable doing that and knowing the teacher is there to help and support and that as teachers we do want to know. We want to know those concerns so we can start thinking about ways to support the child and the parents.

Debbie: That's great. That's a big part of TiLT is encouraging parents to feel comfortable being open about what's happening and what's difficult and what's different for them because, as you said, I think there are so many people who are afraid they're going to be judged or their child is going to be judged. But I believe so firmly that we have to start talking about these things openly and that it's not something to be ashamed of. It is what it is. And it really is only through true openness that these kids are going to be able to thrive and feel good about who they are.

Becca: You're exactly right—this *does* need to be talked about more and I really want parents to feel empowered about working as a team with those classroom teachers or other support at the school. And I just really want parents to know that as teachers we do care so much about every single child's education. And that's why we're there. We wouldn't go in every morning doing what we're doing if we didn't care. And I know so many parents understand that and appreciate it. So as long as there's that open stream of communication and consistency and good relationships, so much growth can happen just within one school year. It's really beautiful to see.

Debbie: I wish I could bring Asher back and you could be his teacher for a year!

Becca: Or maybe I should come to the Netherlands and teach him there.

Debbie: Sounds good to me! But seriously, this has been so insightful. One of the things we parents of differently-wired kids stress out about the most is finding the right fit or figuring out what to do when our child's not thriving at school. So this has been fantastic information—thank you so much.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- Becca Wertheim on [Huffington Post](#)
- [Claxton Elementary School](#)