



SIP and Sam Inclusion Coffee Talk

Episode 0001 – A Deeper Dive into the Power of Language

Podcast Transcription

A collaborative conversation addressing barriers and innovative practices to inclusive programming. In today's episode Janelle Mercado, Coordinator of the Supporting Inclusive Practices Project will be speaking with Sam Drazin, Executive Director of Changing Perspectives to follow up from an amazing series of professional learning presented by Sam. For those of you who might have missed it, you can catch the recorded webinars on our SIP resource webpage at www.sipinclusion.org. The questions that we will discuss were asked by attendees of the professional learning event.

00:00:00 Janelle Mercado:

Hello everyone! Thank you for joining SIP and Sam Coffee Talk today: a collaborative conversation addressing barriers and Innovative programming. My name is Janelle Mercado, Coordinator of Supporting Inclusive Practices, and Sam Drazin, Executive Director of Changing Perspectives, is joining us today and I'm thrilled to begin this crucial conversation.

00:00:26 Sam Drazin:

Thanks, Janelle for that introduction. I am too, I really feel like now more than ever before it's so important that we, uh, start these conversations to really help to educate, engage, and inspire all of us to be inclusive change-makers of tomorrow.

00:00:45 Janelle:

But I am ready to get started and for all of you listening in today, this is a conversation following an amazing series of professional learning that Sam presented for the Supporting Inclusive Practices Project. And if you might have missed it you can catch the recorded webinars on our SIP Resource page, go to www.sipinclusion.org. So the questions that we're going to be discussing today, um, were asked by attendees of the professional learning event. So Sam, are you ready to jump in?

00:01:22 Sam:

I'm ready, let's jump right in!

00:01:24 Janelle

Let's do it! So Sam, in your presentation you talked about ableism and the importance of framing language. As an inclusion ally, and in a way that does not perpetuate ableist thinking, can you provide suggestions on how to interrupt, and reframe ableist language? So, also, what type of questions might folks ask when talking to individuals



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with disabilities about their personal preferences, wants, or needs regarding language usage.

00:01:59 Sam

So I'm so glad you brought that up, Janelle. And, um, if I remember correctly, in those presentations I did for the Supporting Inclusive Practices Project, there was a lot of engagement through the chat, and through the Q and A, around this idea of language and the power that language possesses. In both helping us create inclusive environments, and simultaneously the power that language has in kind of perpetuating exclusive, uh, environments for individuals with disabilities. Um, and I think when we consider ableist thinking, um, and thinking about how to frame an ableist-language, I think one thing that I would really go back to, is the idea of the Social versus the Medical Model of Disability. It's really important that we understand the Social versus Medical Model, cause that's a way that we can help to kind of reflect and evaluate on kind of what perspective, uh, an individual's bring into this conversation. Are they come into the conversation of inclusion and disability from sort-of, more of that Medical Model, which is people with disabilities just need to change and need fixing to adapt the way our society is designed, or are they coming to it for more of that Social Model around okay how can we change our current structures and systems to better adapt of those with disabilities. Um, so I think one of the biggest ways to refrain ableist-language is for us to better understand ourselves, what this means, and be able to kind of be grounded in some of these theories that can help us better interpret or understand, kind-of the perspectives someone else is bringing to this.

00:03:55 Janelle:

Hm, great point. And often, you know, it can be a challenge to have the courage or vulnerability to stand up and interrupt, or refrain some of the ableist languages that unfortunately is commonly still used. Do you have any suggestions for folks to help them with the language usage and how to interrupt or reframe the language so that we aren't perpetuating those cycles?

00:04:27 Sam:

Yeah, I think one of the best ways to start is to repeat back to someone what they said rather than combatting it or looking at it from a defense standpoint, being able to return the, the, what they said and saying 'So it sounds to me what you're saying is...' and being able to reframe it in language that is going to be more inclusive.

00:04:51 Janelle:

That's a great suggestion, Sam. So what type of questions would you suggest asking when talking to an individual with a disability about their personal preference, wants, or needs regarding language usage. In your professional learning, you recommended (and it was a great suggestion) ASK a person how they want to be referred, or anything that you want to know about their disability. So do you have any suggestions for that?



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00:05:20 Sam:

Yeah, I think one of my biggest suggestions, um, with that, is when you ask those questions to an individual with disabilities, is really frame it in a very open-ended way. And frame it in a way that puts the ball, uh, puts the conversation in their court. So, you know, rather than saying you know 'do you want me to refer to you in person first language, or not' say to them (you know, because that's giving them a specific choice) say to them 'how would you like me to refer to you as'. Um, and I also think that when we ask those questions: we can't assume that we know what their wants or what their needs are. So we really have to frame the questions in an open-ended way, to provide them with the independence and ability to respond in a way that really is true to them. And their wants needs and preferences at that moment in time

00:06:17 Janelle:

Absolutely! Yeah, and with that, in the presentation we talked about the use of harmful language, and that there is language and terminology that is currently being used unfortunately still today. Um, and so the question is: can you provide some phrases or words that you would suggest just folks remove entirely from their vocabulary

00:06:41 Sam:

Definitely. And before I say that, I'll just preface that this is based on MY perspectives and my personal/professional work in this area.

00:06:47 Janelle:

Sure.

00:06:48 Sam:

I feel that there's a lot of harmful language or language that perpetuates uh, ableism, perpetuates a negative perspective of disability. So some of those words or phrases that I hear sometimes, um, that I would suggest removing would be words like Handicapped, um, the term Special-Needs, um, the R-word obviously (retard or retarded). Those are, those are, kind of the three ones that really jumped to mind that are ones that I think if we could eliminate those, that would help move inclusion and just a more strength space perspectives of disability but going forward.

00:07:45 Janelle:

Sure, absolutely. And I mean, we hear this, and I know that Sam this is from your personal experience and your perspective, but also when you hear from individuals in the community and the disability community, un, you will hear folks who have differing perspectives and opinions. But there are some very common themes, and those that you just mentioned are those that I hear probably most often. But, you know, I think it goes back to what you said earlier: ask people from their experiences, what their preferences are, and what language so we can constantly be learning and growing.

00:08:32 Sam:



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Language around disabilities is always changing! What might be deemed acceptable or politically correct in 2022, may NOT be acceptable and politically correct in 2025.

00:08:45 Janelle:
Right.

00:08:53 Sam:
So, it's about kind of going into this work with really a growth mindset within ourselves, and recognize that we are always learning, we're always adapting, and that the biggest thing that we can do is keep an open mind, keep an open heart. And really be aware of, you know kind-of, what comes out of our mouth and how we can tweak it going forward, to kind-of continue to push for a more equitable and inclusive and justice society.

00:09:04 Janelle:
Absolutely! And I would just add: and listen to the voices of those who have personal experiences.

00:09:17 Sam:
Exactly!

00:09:17 Janelle:
Because that is, that is where we need to learn and grow. I mean..

00:09:19 Sam:
Exactly!

00:09:23 Janelle:
One can't really unless they've had those personal experiences!

00:09:28 Sam:
Right and I think, you know, we going back to an ableist perspective, and an ableist perspective is someone without a disability assuming they know..

00:09:37 Janelle:
Right

00:09:38 Sam:
What an individual with a disability needs or wants, or how they want to be referred to.

00:09:43 Janelle:
So in your last presentation, you talked a lot about positive representation of individuals with disabilities in media and society and we've, we've come a long way. I mean we, we are seeing more and more in television shows, and um, on networks, and interviews,



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and movies. We've seen more positive representation of individuals with disabilities. Can you suggest resources in ways to help others become an Inclusion Ally and improve the representation of individuals with disabilities in and beyond schools? How can we incorporate that in the school setting?

00:10:22 Sam:

Definitely I think that's so important because part of what we're trying to do, is not just make schools more inclusive to students with disability, but we're trying to make society more inclusive to all people; both with and without disabilities. Um, within school, one of the things that I think is really important is making sure that disability is represented throughout the school building. So really kind-of walking around your school with kind-of the lens of disability representation, and look at the posters in the hallway! Look at the posters in the classroom, do the posters show students with disabilities? You know, we want students to feel like they are represented in the curriculum material, in the pictures on the wall, throughout their school building. So I would really look for, you know, the posters and the pictures around the school. The other thing that I would really, highly suggest, is working with your school librarian to ensure that there are books in the school library that represent, that include, characters with disabilities. And there's a growing and growing number of books, both picture and chapter books, out there that include characters with disabilities. So work with your school librarian to do an assessment of what you have, and look for opportunities to encourage, uh, encourage the purchase of new books. In terms of beyond school, I think you know one of the biggest things is encouraging friends, family, neighbors, co-workers to watch some of these TV shows! To watch some of these movies, right? We want this to become commonplace, not something that's kind of um, trendy (if you will). So outside of the school setting, I think one of the biggest ways that we can help to um, support greater inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the media: is by encouraging our friends, our families, our coworkers to watch some of these films, to watch some of these TV shows. You know, maybe you have a, a screening party, or a virtual screening party and you talk about it with a group of people afterwards. I think really the sharing of information is one of the most important things that we can do. Um, the Ruderman Family Foundation, um is a foundation I think based in Boston, Massachusetts and they have done a lot of work around policy for Hollywood to include more, uh, greater representation of actors and actresses with disabilities. So that would be a resource that, that folks might be interested in checking out.

00:13:09 Janelle:

I love that, And I love when we can see movies or TV shows where the person that is doing the acting is truly a person with a disability. Um, and I just love that more and more you're seeing folks being hired in Hollywood to do this work, and it is just furthering the inclusive opportunities for individuals. So going back to the book list, which is a great suggestion, I wanted to remind folks if they weren't able to join the series that Changing Perspectives (Sam's organization) created a snippet of a book list, of potential books that could be housed in your school libraries, that we added on to the



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Padlet which can be accessed on our resource webpage. So again, if you weren't able to join the professional learning series that Sam prevented on: you can go to www.SIPinclusion.org, click on our resource webpage, you will find the padlet that we are referring to, and the book list that Sam recommended. Sam, do you have any other suggestions?

00:14:22 Sam:

No, the book list is pretty comprehensive! And I would just encourage folks to continue to look! There are more and more books being published every day, that are featuring individuals with disabilities.

00:14:39 Janelle:

Great. So, for those educators out there that are creating an inclusive, supportive, free-of-judgment learning environment, can you recommend ways to begin discussions with students about honoring differing abilities and disabilities within the classroom? So how can we start normalizing difference, how can we have candid and curious conversations with and amongst our student body?

00:15:08 Sam:

That's a great question and a big question, and a question I get asked a lot! Um, and, there's no one answer to this. But I think we do need to um, first of all help teachers: so provide teachers with steps, strategies, and resources, where they feel more comfortable and confident facilitating these conversations, right? That's the number one, key thing. We have to start kind-of changing the paradigm that disability is a negative, right? We need to look at disability and promote disability from more of a strengths-based perspective, rather than a deficit-strengths perspective. But to really get to the root of your question about how can you begin these conversations: first of all, you want to think about low-risk to high-risk conversations. One of the things that I've seen schools do, is they'll sometimes get so excited about this work that they jump into a high-risk conversation right away, and it doesn't go so well. And then they're really afraid to ever do it again! And so it's really about doing this in a very intentional and scaffolded way. So right when we start, before we even start talking about disability, let's just start talking about difference. Right? Difference in opinion, difference in likes and dislikes. Like so for example, a very low risk conversation might be: 'let's just share our favorite breakfast cereals', right? Like I'm sure you would feel very comfortable telling me your favorite breakfast cereal right now, and so would I. That's very low risk

00:16:45 Janelle:

Sure!



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00:16:47 Sam:

To get to higher risk conversations, you're talking about 'share with school subject is hardest for you'. Um, you get to higher risk 'share what accommodations you need to be successful in life' you know, things like that. So really looking, you know, the way that I frame this sometimes is that you wanna go about this the same way you would teach math, or reading, right? As scaffolded, with an intentional approach. So I would really start with low-risk conversations that are really focusing on difference. After that, I'd then suggest moving in and talk about was visible disabilities. Because it's much easier for students to naturally understand and and be able to empathize with visible disabilities, as opposed to invisible. So go from general differences to visible diff-, disabilities, and then to those invisible.

00:17:42 Janelle:

So for those of our listeners who not have joined the professional learning event, can you talk more about what you mean by visible and invisible disabilities

00:17:52 Sam:

Sure, so I like to think about disabilities as falling into two groups here. Disabilities that are visible meaning when you look at somebody, you at first glance notice that there may be a difference. Um,so those might be individuals who might need, uh, have a physical disability, or a mobility challenge. Opposed to invisible disabilities, which are when you look at someone, it's not obvious from the outside that they might have some sort of disability. So that might be individuals who have learning disabilities, uh maybe indiv, individuals who um, have a hearing impairment, and it's not obvious from the outside the way their ears look.

00:18:40 Janelle:

Mhm. I love what you talked about going low-risk to high-risk. And some of those questions in-between are questions that truly, as teachers, we would gain so much insight by asking all of our students. Questions like: 'what is it that we did today in the activity or the lesson that we did, what helped your learning?'. Like those are just great questions, that not only give us information as teachers but help kids start to get insights about themselves. Or the next day, 'what is it, based on how you feel on a rating of 1-10, how engaged are you?' and 'what do you need to feel more engaged today?' Those are questions that we'd wanna ask any student, but also give us information about one another, insights, etcetera.

00:19:30 Sam:

Oh, 100%! And so much of this work, although we're talking about students with disabilities, this work really benefits all students.

00:19:39 Janelle:

Right!



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00:19:40 Sam:

Um, yeah. And so by doing that kind of work at the beginning of the school year, right at the start of the year, you start to build that comfort within your classroom. You start to build the foundation and the respect in terms of how we engage and have these conversations. So when we get to the higher-risk conversations, when you get to maybe talking about invisible disabilities that are prevalent in your classroom or school community, it's a much more successful conversation.

00:20:08 Janelle:

100%! And I think it's really honoring and celebrating the differences in everything, right? I mean, we all bring something unique and incredible to the learning environment, although we learn differently, we look differently, we act differently, but being able to celebrate that! And celebrate wins and failures! Creating an environment where students know that failure is part of the learning process, we're all here to support and celebrate that so we can help each other learn and grow.

00:20:42 Sam:

Exactly, exactly.

00:20:46 Janelle:

So I think our last question that came up a lot in, from attendees of the last professional learning event is: for educators that are trying to make a more deliberate effort to invite individuals with disabilities into classroom conversations and into decision making, what are some ways to approach that conversation and make sure they feel included?

00:21:11 Sam:

Yeah, about kind-of transforming our places and spaces to be authentically inclusive. And when we think about authentic inclusion, I like to think about it in three different areas. We have academic inclusion, or the content we're talking about needs to be inclusive. We have physical inclusion, which are those places, and spaces and sensory inputs. And we have social inclusion, that sense of belonging. And so, when we consider how individuals with disabilities can be involved in, kind-of, decision making around maybe the school or society at large, I think we have to consider: how do we make sure that the content that's being presented is inclusive, how can we ensure that the space that we're meeting in to have these conversations is inclusive, and how can we ensure that that sense of belonging is really kind-of, uh, tangible. Right? Like, everybody feels a sense of belonging, they all feel like their voice is being heard, and they're a part of the group. Um, so, specifically beyond that, now that I've kind of set the stage there, the framework for this, I think one of the things that we have to do is consider opportunities for explicit invitation. And, and valuing multiple perspectives in a given conversation. And the mindset that what an individual with a disability might share, although it might come from them, we wanna get back to that idea of UDL, or Universal Design for Learning. That I think sometimes, people take what an individual with disabilities might



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say, and just assume that they're saying it because it's just going to help them. And that in fact, if we listen to what they're saying, and consider how does what they're saying not just help them, but actually assist and make the world a better place for everybody?

00:23:13 Janelle:

True. So what, what's necessary for some is incredibly beneficial for all in many cases.

00:23:21 Sam:

That's a great way to summarize what I just said!

00:23:23 Janelle:

Laughing

00:23:24 Sam:

Nicely done!

00:23:27 Janelle:

Laughing Well, you know, I think what I'm hearing you say too, is how important it is to lift up the voices of every student. And how valuable that can be for us as educators. Ask our students.

00:23:46 Sam:

Ask our students and really think about, yeah, I'm a really huge proponent about making sure that students with IEPs are at the table at those meetings. I'm a huge proponent of students with 504s being at the meetings. And from a young age, we need to, at a very young age, we need to start to give students a voice and some choice, and that can be incredibly empowering to them and it can be incredibly eye-opening for the adults in the room as well.

00:24:14 Janelle:

Laughing Well and what takes my, I mean, the idea that's giving me is really looking at it outside of the classroom. Our communities, our clubs, our organizations, on school sites from elementary all the way through, err early elementary all the way to high school. Right, especially going into middle school and high school where we have students that start to really become part of organizations and decision-makers for the student body. For the community of school and sports, etcetera, bringing kids and making sure that there's representation and kids with disabilities at the table in student government and other organizations is a really important part of lifting the voices of the disability community.

00:25:03 Sam:

So important in recognizing! However, if we have not created a socially inclusive community at our school, that students with disabilities may not be the ones that are willing to come to the stage and/or be comfortable with getting on stage and running an election to be part of student council or something like that.



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00:25:24 Janelle:
Absolutely.

00:25:26 Sam:
So if our community isn't socially inclusive, we are automatically or inherently excluding students from even participating because we haven't built that community in. SO we may have to be creative or think about other ways to engage those voices.

00:25:41 Janelle:
Right, right. Good point! Well Sam, as always, such a pleasure! Every time we talk, I learn more and more from you. So, thank you for joining, and engaging in this crucial conversation. And thanks to our listeners for engaging in this work and continuing their efforts to become Inclusion Allies and Inclusion Changemakers!

00:26:07 Sam:
Thanks, Janelle, and I'm honored to be a part of, you know, this this movement and this work! And likewise, I always enjoy our conversations and I always walk away from them just feeling you know, more engaged and more motivated for the progress that we're going to make collaboratively to support schools and communities to create more inclusive societies for everybody!

00:26:35 Janelle:
There you go, the work continues!

00:26:26 Sam:
Yes!

00:26:27 Janelle:
Thanks, everyone!



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