From the Trenches: Secondary Content Teachers and IEP, Inclusion Students

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Introduction

Secondary content teachers want to accommodate their special education students. They know that their classrooms provide the "least restrictive environment" specified by Public Law 94-142. They understand that inclusion is federally mandated and, even more importantly, often seen as necessary for teens to reach their full potential as students and as successful adults.

But these teachers face many obstacles, frequently with little or no assistance. Among those obstacles: normal loads of 160 to 180 students; lack of notification of students with IEPs or 504 plans; shortage of inclusion teachers; only a single, broad introductory course in exceptional children. In addition, the bottom line, made clear by the administration, is that they must adhere to pacing guides and prepare students to pass the end-of-course exams to meet the No Child Left Behind requirements.

Special education has moved out of the self-contained classroom and into the content rooms, but the math teacher, the English teacher often are ill prepared to accommodate the needs of these students alone. Inclusion must be more than a physical reassignment of students from one classroom to another; to succeed it must include a school-wide philosophical commitment, and it must provide assistance to the secondary content teachers in the trenches.

Literature

A review of the literature quickly confirms that the vast majority of school reform research, development, and funding has been focused on elementary and urban schools. Reform development at the secondary level is dramatically lagging. Allan Ornstein and David Levine write that "relatively few studies have concentrated solely on the characteristics of unusually effective senior high schools." The reason they offer for this is that "high school goals and programs are so diverse and complex, it is difficult to conclude that one is more effective than another, particularly when the social class of the student body is taken into account. In addition," they conclude, "hardly any high schools enrolling mostly working-class students stand out as being relatively high in

achievement" (482). It would appear that the 9-12 of K-12 is largely missing from the past decades' national school improvement debates and reforms.

Just as effective school research and reforms are more prevalent at the elementary school level, so too are successful inclusion practices (Cole 1997; Banerji and Dalley 1995; Zigmond, et al. 1995). Inclusion programs with impressive gains for students both with and without disabilities are available at the elementary level to serve as reform models. At the secondary level, there are few successful programs, and most are short-lived. Even the most cursory look at the two levels of schooling point to two obvious reasons for the difference: numbers of students and schedules.

Elementary schools by tradition house lower numbers of students. State mandated teacher-student ratios are lower for the younger grades, and full or part-time teacher assistants provide additional support, allowing for work with small groups or individual students. Additionally, students remain with the same teacher for the majority, if not all, of every school day, providing a close, continuous relationship across all the subject areas.

The contrast to secondary school numbers is glaring, as six to eight or more elementary schools feed into one high school, which often houses 2500 to 3000 plus students. Higher teacher-student ratios give teachers with a six-block schedule a load of 160 to 180 students. On an A/B days block schedule, the high school teachers only see their students for 90 minutes every other school day and for only one subject. Additionally, teaching assistants are rare at the secondary level, leaving one teacher little time to accommodate individual needs in a class of 30 or more students. Such teacher overload necessarily leads to rationing of attention.

The literature describing exceptional learners and inclusion, as well as that describing schools highlighted for inclusive learning practices, shows marked similarities in the criteria essential for implementation of successful inclusion, criteria that cut across all grade levels (Vadasy 2003; Phelps 2003; Bateman 2002; Colling 2003). Four follow.

1. Full commitment to the concept of inclusion by the entire educational community: the school board, the district administration, the principals, and the general education and special education teachers.

2. In-service training for general education teachers.

3. Collaborative planning and teaching.

4. Implementation of research-based, challenging teaching practices for all students.

Full Commitment

Without total commitment from the entire educational community, full inclusion will not succeed. Much of what passes for inclusion is not. Placing students with disabilities in existing classrooms without modifications in the regular education model and without adequate supports or training for the general education teachers does not constitute inclusion. Nancy Zollers (1999) writes, "Such organizational deficiencies are more characteristic of older special education models such as 'mainstreaming' and school integration than inclusion" (2). The responsibility for inclusion cannot be left to the individual content-area teacher alone. It cannot be viewed as a money-saving device, one that relieves the school of supporting special education classes, but rather the school board must rework budgets to include additional funding for the ongoing in-service

training that must accompany it and for the additional special education teachers and material resources it will necessitate. The district administration must then provide for the implementation of the budgeted in-service training and the securing of the additional positions allocated.

The principals, key players who hold critical and challenging roles, must provide the leadership and support essential for carrying out a school-wide philosophy of inclusion. According to Collins and White (2000), "for a school to effectively address the needs of its special education population, the principal must display a positive attitude and commitment to inclusion practices and possess the skills and knowledge to lead the staff to create an inclusive learning environment" (3). Study-after-study reinforces the importance of the principal's role. Concern, however, is raised over the often inadequate training for such a crucial leadership role in inclusion. It is reported that principals spend from 15 to 45% of their time dealing with issues related to special education and yet only seven states require any training in special education for certification as a principal. "A national study of 23 administrator programs and 457 educational administration students found that special education is treated inadequately, if at all, in programs designed to prepare school leaders" (Sirotnik and Kimbell 1994, quoted in Collins and White 2001, 7). Examples of school-level backing and support the principal must provide include assigning students with disabilities evenly among classrooms, and building into the school schedule ongoing time throughout the year for in-service training, collaborative planning, meetings, and conferences (Bateman 2002).

The teachers, another set of key players, must be included in all stages of planning and implementation. They must not view this as still another top-down dictate or its

success will be severely limited. Following the example of Mather High School in Chicago, Illinois, a school "cited for superior efforts to comply with federal special education laws," new teachers must understand the school-wide inclusion philosophy and fully commit to it prior to their hiring (Duffrin 2002).

In-service Training

The importance of in-service training for general education teachers, criterion two, cannot be over emphasized. Secondary content teaches feel competent to teach their subject areas to students without disabilities, but less prepared to address the needs of inclusion students. Again, pre-service training is a concern. Not all undergraduate teacher education programs require coursework in special education, and those that do most often offer a general exceptional-child-101-type course. These tend to be so broad that the curriculum becomes little more than "the disability of the week." Also, because the coursework is completed pre-service, the content is theoretical, with no opportunity for concurrent practical application. In-service training must include not only a review of the history, the terms, and the legal requirements of special education, but it also must focus on the specific disabilities of students in a specific teacher's class. Trainers must listen to what the teachers say they need to know and adapt their training to meet those needs. Workable strategies must be provided, and follow-up to critique and answer questions about implementation is essential (Bateman 2002). Joyce and Weill (1996) stress the importance of ongoing support following any introduction to new methods of teaching if implementation is to be successful. Training in teaming for collaborative planning and teaching is another important component of the in-service instruction. In schools

committed to inclusion, in-service cannot be an optional extra that only the committed attend, but it must be an expectation for everyone.

Collaborative Planning and Teaching

The third criterion for successful inclusion, collaborative planning and teaching, receives unanimous support in the literature. The authors of a final evaluation report on training for inclusive education wrote, 'for inclusion to be successful, all members of the educational community need to work together to provide wrap-around services for students." They continued, "One teacher alone in a classroom cannot hope to accommodate the educational needs of 20 to 30 students exhibiting a wide range of academic ability, physical skill, and behavioral appropriateness. Inclusion demands a team effort with on-going support for the teacher" (Colling 2003, 39). A virtual library of resources is available to aid in professional collaboration, and IDEA-04 mandates it.

The shortage of general education teachers in some regions of the United States and the shortage and continued projected shortage of special education teachers throughout the country exacerbate this issue (Ornstein 2006). Inadequate numbers of special education teachers mean unreasonable responsibilities for those on staff, impossible student loads. Practicing content teachers this author works with report they are often not even notified until well into the academic year of students on their class lists who have IEPs or 504 plans. They are told that though they have inclusion students and should have an inclusion teacher to assist them, those inclusion teachers are not available and they will just have to handle it on their own. Or they are told that an inclusion teacher will come into their classes, but only for the block. They are instructed to give the

inclusion teacher a copy of their lesson plan when she arrives and she will help the students with disabilities as she can. This is not collaborative planning or teaching; indeed, it lowers the professional status of the special education teacher to that of paraprofessional serving in a general education classroom.

When IEPs and 504 plans are finally provided to content teachers, they attempt to comply with the requirements. Their success depends on the number of total students they have in that block, the ability level, the classroom management issues, as well as the number of disabled students in the block requiring accommodations. Additional time on quizzes and tests, photocopied class notes, and front row seating are accommodations easily made; other accommodations may or may not be made.

General education teachers and special education teachers generally have widely varied perspectives on students and on instructional methods.

> As Cuban (1984) noted, general education teachers at the secondary level tend to be subject-focused and teacher-centered, whereas teachers of students with disabilities tend to be more student-centered. The experience and training of general education teachers has focused on ways to help students learn a specific subject: how to understand algebra, how to learn to write well, how to communicate, how to use a calculator. In contrast, the training of teachers of students with disabilities often centers on methods for ensuring student success by adapting instruction, altering curriculum, and so forth. (Cole 1997, 8)

Only with adequate time for planning and teaching as a team can inclusion students benefit from the wedding of the two approaches.

With both collaborative planning and teaching, the needs of all students within the class can be met. Without it, the secondary content class lives down to the stereotypical dumping-ground designation, the one that so often passes for inclusion and perpetuates its bad reputation.

This problem is further compounded in high schools with high concentrations of disabled students. The release of school districts from court-mandated desegregation has certainly contributed to increases. Elizabeth Duffrin (2002), in her article "Special Education Enrollment Grows more Lopsided," gave an example in the Chicago schools. In 2002, Austin High School, located in the impoverished west side, had 40% of their freshman class categorized as special education students. While Northside College Prepatory High School, located in the more affluent north side, had only 3%, a total of seven students, designated special education students. She noted, "It's a stark contrast illustrating a disturbing trend. As numbers of disabled students rise, they become increasingly segregated in the most troubled schools."

Implementation of Research-based, Challenging Practices

The final criterion for successful inclusion is implementation of research-based, challenging practices for all students. Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the national debate on education has produced a plethora of studies and reports on best teaching strategies. Such pedagogical practices as involving students in critical thinking, using high-order questioning, helping students link new knowledge to prior learning, and

engaging students in active learning and metacognition have received widespread support as research-based, challenging practices.

Not surprisingly, higher-level cognitive learning strategies are more prevalent in secondary schools located in affluent areas and in courses for Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate students. According to Ornstein and Levine (2006) the "emphasis on passive learning of low-level skills seems particularly pervasive in schools with concentrations of working class students and low achievers" (480). Those very schools seeing increasing concentrations of disabled students.

The same authors address obstacles that must be overcome in moving cognitive learning into lower-socioeconomic schools. These include "the preference many students have developed for low-level learning, teachers' low expectations for low achievers, and the high financial cost of effective instruction that emphasizes cognitive development" (Ornstein 2006, 480).

One of the few school reform studies at the high school level that incorporates inclusion students was conducted by the Research Institute on Secondary Education Reform for Youth with Disabilities at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and included four United States high schools. "School reform practices in these schools [were] aligned with specific research criteria developed to highlight authentic and inclusive learning practices for all students." Authentic learning practices were described as those which "involve students in using disciplined inquiry (e.g., problem-solving processes) to construct in-depth knowledge" (Phelps 2003, 1).

Common features of the four high schools were:

1. [They] included students with disabilities and maintained a focus on authentic and challenging academic standards—seeing neither as mutually exclusive nor competing.

2. More than a marketing or political tagline for school improvement efforts, these strategies are reflected in what students and teachers do each day as part of their graduation portfolio, internship, community service project, or professional learning community (Phelps 2003, 2)

The results of this study show strong support for implementation of research-based, challenging practices for all students. One major finding in particular points to the success of these practices.

Teachers using more intellectually demanding instructional tasks (e.g., requiring analysis and interpretation) receive work from both disabled and non-disabled students that is more authentic. In samples of students' work on 35 teacher-developed tasks, 62% of students with disabilities produced work that was the same, or higher, in quality than that produced by their nondisabled peers. With more challenging instructional tasks, students with disabilities performed better than both students with and without disabilities who received less demanding assignments (Phelps 2003, 3).

Impediments to Program Success

Just as there is consensus on what is needed to create and sustain successful inclusion programs, there is also general consensus on three major impediments to these programs. The first is change in personnel in the school. Ambitious inclusion program reforms are usually the vision of and spearheaded by one leader or a small group of

leaders. Once up and running, and sometimes even prior to full implementation, retirements and turnover of the original committed staff members cause termination of the programs. The needed full commitment of the entire educational community is difficult to sustain, even with careful hiring in individual schools.

The second impediment to success involves funding. Several programs begun with grant money witnessed the demise of their successful innovations with the end of the grant. Federal, state, and district funding for programs is also problematic as priorities change, new mandates are received, or as committed funding is not forthcoming. The 1975 commitment to fund 40 % of the average per pupil cost for every special education student is the prime example of the latter. "In 2004, the federal government [was] providing local school districts with just under 20% of its commitment rather than the 40% specified by law, creating a $10.6 billion shortfall for states and local districts" (NEA). As Congressman Charles Bass, Republican of New Hampshire, so famously stated in 1998 before the House of Representatives hearing on special education funding, it "is indeed the mother of all unfunded mandates in this country." Not only does this place a heavy financial burden on local communities, but it also denies full educational opportunity to students both with and without disabilities.

The third and final impediment to the few highlighted secondary inclusion programs is the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, President George W. Bush's educational reform initiative. This is still another under-funded mandate that vies with special education programs for money, and exerts "more federal influence on local public schools than at any time in the previous thirty years" (Ornstein 2006, 217). In addition, it,

along with the business model call for accountability, has reshaped curriculum. Larry Cuban, writing in *School: The Story of American Public Education* points out:

> The few studies that have been done about teaching and learning in actual classrooms before the 1980s and since confirm that dominant patterns of teacher-centered instruction in both elementary and secondary schools have remained stable. If anything, the impact of standards-based performance and accountability for test score improvement has hardened these traditional teaching practices. Once-flourishing progressive classroom approaches such as portfolios, project-based teaching, and performance-based testing that blossomed between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, for example, have since shriveled under the unrelenting pressure for higher test scores (2001, 179-180)

The No Child Left Behind Act initially gave hope to some special education advocates because it would hold schools accountable for the progress of their exceptional students. However, the reality of its implementation has largely dashed the original hopes. With the additional pressure on districts, principals, and teachers to measure progress by assessing students on a single standardized test, research-based, challenging teaching practices have given way to teaching to the test. So-called pacing guides have been created in some districts to tell teachers exactly what to teach, exactly how long to teach it, dependent on how many test questions cover that content, and even, exactly what to say and do while teaching it—scripted lesson plans. The pace must be maintained, no matter the mastery of the content, and problem-solving and higher-order thinking strategies, too time intensive, have given way to memorization of facts, for both disabled and nondisabled students.

School-wide inclusion philosophy has morphed to a school-wide testing philosophy. What has been learned about successful high school inclusion learning seems to have been relegated to history, to still another fad that passed through the schools a few years back. And, the special education inclusion students continue to be assigned to unaided content teachers.

These major impediments to successful inclusion programs, changes in school personnel, curtailment of funding, and the emphasis on testing with No Child Left Behind, have sounded the death knell for nearly all of the few successful secondary programs found in the literature.

East Lake High School in Seattle, Washington, was a project school described as one that "implemented processes and instructional interventions designed to support the full inclusion of students with disabilities throughout the school community." Practices included all of those deemed best practices: "collaborative planning among general and special education staff…as well as supports needed by general education teachers…[and] research-based practices to support inclusion." The school was led by a principal "who was fully committed to the concept of full inclusion and selected classroom teachers who were also supportive of this goal" (Vadasy 2002, 3).

This project funded by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, however, was short lived. The grant report noted one cause as "major staff changes, including the imminent retirement of the principal, and turnover in special education staff who were key players in the school's inclusion model." The report concluded, "only one year after the federal grant ended (which supported the Inclusion model), the program was no longer being implemented" (Vadasy 2002, 4).

The University of Wisconsin-Madison study of four successful inclusion high schools noted the threat of similar problems.

> At three of the four sites, the school's vision was created by a local leader or a small group of leaders some 5-10 years ago. Full implementation, along with efforts to maintain the vision and associated practices, have been constrained by the turnover in school leadership, the recent emphasis on state standards and high stakes assessment, and, in some cases local and state funding. Since state assessments generally use paper and pencil, closed-response items, teachers and principals view state assessments as significant threats to authentic and inclusive learning practices (Phelps 2003, 3).

Conclusion

In the thirty years since the enactment of Public Law 94-142, research studies have demonstrated components essential to sustaining successful inclusion programs: full commitment to the concept of inclusion by the entire educational community, in-service training for general education teachers, collaborative planning and teaching between general education and special education teachers, and implementation of research-based, challenging teaching practices for all students.

With all four of these, programs can and do succeed. However, the number of successful secondary school programs, never great, is diminishing rather than expanding, attributable to the lack of continuing full commitment by necessary personnel, lack of sustained funding, and the change of priorities brought about by the bottom-line

accountability of No Child Left Behind. Once again we seem to be losing ground in this ongoing evolution to full inclusion.

Special education has indeed moved out of the self-contained classroom and into the content rooms, but the math teacher, the English teacher are, decades later, still ill prepared to accommodate the needs of these students alone. For inclusion to succeed, assistance must be provided to the secondary content teachers in the trenches.

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