

Collaboration as a Means to Support Inclusion

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Abstract

Inclusion has been an integral part of school policies worldwide for decades, yet the application of inclusionary principles depends on the attitude and skill set of the individual teacher in the classroom. Changing the requirements of pre-service teacher training, combined with the development of an inclusive ethos in school divisions will address the philosophical inconsistency regarding inclusion in classrooms. Allocating increasingly limited professional development funds toward school-based collaborative teams, rather than “event-based” professional development held off-campus, will create a cohesive, sustainable model to ensure teacher growth and entrench inclusionary practices in general education classrooms.

The success of inclusionary practices in schools is dependent on the varying attitudes and subsequent actions of classroom teachers. The result is that students with disabilities do not achieve the same academic outcomes as their peers on a consistent basis. While teachers acknowledge that differentiation has the greatest likelihood of meeting the needs of diverse learners, the realization that an increasing number of students require significant adaptations to be successful is not often met with enthusiasm (O'Rourke, 2015). This attitude is present in both pre-service and practicing teachers, and can be addressed by a more purposeful practicum experience in the former, and an establishment of an inclusive ethos with the latter. A more optimistic approach toward special needs students will enable teachers to create a more inclusive classroom (Monson, Ewing, & Kwoka, 2013). My experience has shown that a change in attitude is not enough; the acceptance of special needs students in general education classrooms must be supported by effective and manageable strategies to ensure academic success. Teachers are inundated with professional development opportunities that promise results; however time and money dictate the extent of learning opportunities that are accessed. Few school divisions can afford to send all of their educators to the professional development sessions they require. Purposeful teacher collaboration has the capacity to develop teachers' differentiation skills (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016). Collaboration also has the potential to shift teachers' attitudes regarding inclusion toward a more positive perspective.

Fostering Positive Attitudes Regarding Inclusion

The attitudes toward inclusion among school staff can vary, with teachers' beliefs shaped by past experience or length of tenure. The approach to change these attitudes is dependent on the stage of career for the teacher in question. Pre-service teacher attitudes toward students with disabilities can be addressed by changing student teaching requirements. For practising teachers, school divisions must attend to their organization's vision statements regarding the education of special needs students, substantiating the words of the vision with an ethos of inclusion.

Pre-Service Teachers

In Manitoba, pre-service teachers may have very little understanding of the need to differentiate instruction; they have not faced the profound challenges of creating an inclusive classroom while maintaining high academic standards (Jordan, Glenn, & McGhee-Richmond, 2010). Their own public school experience may have provided little opportunity to interact with special needs students, or reinforced the view that those students should be excluded from the general education classroom. This unintentional ignorance is further exacerbated by student

teaching placements that are random; a series of practicum placements may not provide any opportunities to work with special needs students. The end result, in many cases, is teachers beginning their careers influenced by preconceived beliefs about inclusion, rather than by understanding the diverse needs of the students in their classroom (Robinson, 2017).

Pre-service teacher attitudes can be reshaped in favour of inclusion by more purposeful practicum placements. Currently, student teaching assignments in rural Manitoba are often dictated by available supervising teachers rather than by a structured plan that will ensure teacher candidates have the opportunity to work with special needs students or train in an inclusive classroom. I propose that alongside a compulsory course focusing on special education strategies, pre-service teachers must complete an extended practicum placement that ensures teacher candidates participate directly in planning, implementing, instructing, revising, and reporting on goals set out in a student's Individual Education Plan (IEP). This placement would be in addition to the traditional practice of providing student teachers experience teaching in general education classrooms based on their grade level or specialist focus. Swain, Nordness, and Leader-Janssen (2012) conducted a study wherein pre-service teachers completed a 20-hour practicum experience specifically working with special needs students, in addition to coursework; their findings indicated that this model may promote understanding and provide students with an opportunity to realize "the significance of individualized instruction" (p. 80). Such a profound change in teacher training would require a considerable coordination amongst universities, school divisions and the provincial government. A pilot program based on the 2012 study would be an ideal model upon which to develop a more realistic practicum experience for teacher candidates. Pre-service training needs to adapt to satisfy the needs of teacher candidates (Allday, Neilson-Gatti, & Hudson, 2013), and student teachers must successfully meet the challenge of diversifying instruction prior to completing their education degree. Providing pre-service teachers with an opportunity to practise these skills in a structured environment will enable them to begin their careers with a more positive perspective on the challenges they will face in creating an inclusive classroom (Zagonda, Kurth, & MacFarland, 2017).

Experienced Teachers

Vision statements endorsing inclusive school policies have been in place for decades, yet many experienced teachers have not fully embraced the philosophy. The purpose of vision statements in relation to special education is to address the societal barriers to inclusion: the belief that students with special needs are a detriment to the education of "regular" students in the general education classroom. A vision statement promoting inclusion can ring hollow with classroom teachers who have seen similar statements come and go over the course of their careers. A vision statement is meaningless if the words are not reinforced by visible and effective action by all members of the school division.

Experienced teachers' attitudes toward inclusion can be recalibrated with the establishment of an ethos set by divisional and school leaders (MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013). Instructional leaders must go beyond the standalone vision statements, in order to ensure that inclusion becomes the characteristic of the school division and is visible in all aspects of work with students, particularly at the school level. The burgeoning inclusive ethos needs to become a moral code to guide teachers in their work with special needs students. The expectations set out by school principals have a significant impact on teachers' willingness to work with special needs students (MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013); therefore, a clear directive regarding the importance of differentiation of instruction is critical to ensure that it becomes a characteristic of the school. A steadfast adherence to an ethos of inclusion will result in instructional coherence (Bernhardt, 2017), which will change teachers' attitudes regarding working with special needs students.

Collaboration To Facilitate Effective Professional Development

Providing effective professional development opportunities on the subject of inclusion continues to be difficult, despite the recognition that a number of teachers lack competence in this area (Rajovic & Jovanovic, 2013). The challenge becomes greater when one understands that the vast range of individual student needs prevents an effective single approach to ensure inclusion. Students with the same diagnoses require different strategies (Smith, 2015), and some students may require interventions to address academic and behavioural needs. Complex cases such as these demand multiple strategies to support social-emotional and cognitive challenges present in an individual child. Furthermore, inclusion is a moving target: students' needs change over time, as do curricula, support staff allocations, budgets, resources, and stakeholder expectations. Just when teachers may have "figured out" how to support an individual special needs child in a certain time and place, all of the variables change: the student, the classroom structure, and the support. Therefore, teacher training regarding inclusion cannot be static; it must be constantly updated as new strategies emerge. Constantly training every teacher in current inclusionary practices is an expensive proposition; the solution is to utilize the human capital within the school and develop a collaborative model of professional development.

Limited Professional Development Budgets

School divisions are currently faced with the task of balancing budgets with increasing costs and decreasing resources; as a result, professional development funds have decreased significantly in many school divisions, including my own. The 2018-19 budget passed by the Rolling River School Division (2018) identified a reduction of the professional development budget as an element of its divisional budget; therefore, it is imperative that all professional development expenditures at the school and divisional level align with the strategic plan set out by Manitoba Education and Training. The traditional model of teacher professional development saw educators leave the school to attend "P.D. Days," with the requisite expenses of travel, meals, hotels, and substitute teachers to cover their absence. The expense is justified if the teacher finds the professional development helpful, but frequently educators return from these sessions frustrated at the lack of information that can be directly applied to their own classroom setting.

In-School Teacher Collaboration

The solution is to move away from expensive, off-site professional development days and focus on creating collaborative opportunities at school. Collaboration has the potential to be the most effective strategy to support inclusion (Chao, Lai, Ji, Lo, & Sin, 2018; Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016), and educational leaders need to develop a model that ensures the instructional capacity and experience of school teams is accessed by all members of the teaching staff. There is a dangerous assumption that once teachers are provided with an opportunity to work together, effective collaboration is the inevitable result. Some teachers may naturally possess the skills to work alongside colleagues on a project, with the requisite patience and compromise required; however, an effective collaborative team needs to balance collegial behaviour with a willingness to challenge each other. A strong team cannot forsake inclusion and improved teaching and learning in favour of amity and consensus (Schmoker, 2006). Inclusive strategies must be taught alongside collaboration skills, particularly with special educators whose primary function is working with classroom teachers to improve student outcomes (Zagonda et al., 2017). In my school, the best solution is for me to allocate my limited professional development funds primarily to pay for substitute teachers. Teaching staff wishing to collaborate would submit a request for release time, and supply teachers would be hired to

allow staff to meet during the regular school day. During the first collaborative periods with their colleagues, specific strategies regarding collaboration skills would be taught and modelled to the staff by special education teachers who already have the training and experience in this regard. The special education teachers would take the time to set “ground rules” and expectations ahead of time, so that the subsequent collaborative periods will become more effective and productive. Teachers would then have the opportunity to collaborate for an extended period of time at school, developing strategies to support the special needs students in their classroom.

Conclusion

Creating inclusive classrooms will continue to be a challenging endeavour for general education teachers. Their attitude toward the difficult task will be a primary indicator of their likelihood of success. In an era of declining financial support for professional development, school leaders will need to seek out the most efficient and effective opportunities for teacher growth. School-based collaborative teams have the potential to draw upon the collective experience of the teaching staff in order to ensure academic success for all students. When teachers aspire to differentiate their instruction, and requisite release time is provided, teachers can then be trained how to collaborate effectively. The end result will be a sustainable and fluid process for ongoing professional development and greater academic success for special needs students.

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