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Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgement from the Guest Editors: This article is a response from the field to the article in this issue Defining Inclusionary Practices in Catholic Schools by Sean J. Smith, Greg Cheatham, and Jennifer Amilivia. We are grateful to the respondents for their thoughtfulness, insight, and time connecting the worlds of research and practice.

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Response from the Field: Defining Inclusionary Practices in Catholic Schools

Jill Reffett¹

The Critical Elements of Effective Inclusion in Catholic Schools

With an eloquent, and original, comparison of the Holy Family’s faith and decisions surrounding acceptance of unexpected gifts to that of families who have one or more children with disabilities, the authors of this article capture an aspect of our faith rarely captured within the previous arguments presented for why we as Catholics must embrace our call to educate all. Smith, Cheatham, & Amilivia (this issue) highlight the why, but quickly move into the how. By identifying the characteristics of an inclusionary setting followed by effective practices, Smith and colleagues provide a map, of sorts, for today’s Catholic schools. In our struggle to meet the call where All are Welcome, this article reinforces to the field that key indicators are in place, successful efforts underway, and effective practices already identified and thus, available for Catholic schools to apply tomorrow. This is exemplified in the included case study that offers an illustration of what is possible without significant funds, without a separate infrastructure, and within a college preparatory high school environment, not the easiest setting for inclusion. St. Peter and Paul High School illustrates what happens when we look past “cost savings” as plan, and start to instead assess current best practices, and how those in combination with instructional and behavioral frameworks, evidence based practices and student centered planning, lead to high-quality inclusive Catholic schools.

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Embracing Inclusion in the Kansas City Metropolitan Area

EMBRACE's (Enriching Many By Reaching All in Catholic Education) role as an independent nonprofit is to help those Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Kansas City, Kansas include all students, particularly those with disabilities. Founded by a group of dedicated, prayerful, and concerned parents of children with special needs, EMBRACE's goal is to support a learning environment within Catholic schools which embraces all learners, values every child, includes all family members, and sees God's Sacred Holiness in every unique individual. To this end, EMBRACE has worked with Catholic preK-8 as well as 9-12 schools in the Kansas City, KS Archdiocese to proactively include students with disabilities.

Changing Traditional Norms and Practices

While our work has centered on the inclusion of All students, we have found that our role is ever evolving, as we ourselves self-assess and learn more, just as we ask our schools to do. The schools we work with are all in varying stages of inclusion, including, as the authors discuss, a great number who have students with disabilities in their schools, but are still struggling with meaningful inclusion, and have a ways to go. This year, we are following the model as outlined by the authors, and we are asking our schools to assess where they are in their efforts to meet the needs of students with and without disabilities. Looking to challenge the status quo as well as the traditional resource-based special education model, we are asking Catholic schools to work with their key opinion leaders and practitioners within the inclusive Catholic schools' community. Urging them to think outside the box, educators and the entire parish community are being challenged to proactively approach the implementation of an education for all framework. In reality, this same model and outline for the implementation of inclusive practices within our Catholic schools, is the model that organizations across the country, like EMBRACE, should use to assess and implement support for inclusion. All too often we are quick to say that spot funding or placement of personnel is the answer, without first going through the authors' process. As inclusionary efforts have realized, the needed resources for each individual school cannot be determined or addressed via a blanket solution. Yet, to ignore current inclusionary practices, previous successful general education efforts, and instead, to rely on limited funding and on specific specialists to implement special education, is simply silly. EMBRACE, as many similar inclusionary efforts across the country are realizing, is focused on the entire preK-8 and/or 9-12 Catholic school setting. We can no longer accept portions of our parish family and ignore others. Likewise, we can no longer designate specific personnel to serve most of our students (i.e., general education teachers) while separating others (i.e., students with disabilities) to be supported through an alternate infrastructure. Not only is this not feasible but as Smith and his colleagues offer, segregated special education efforts do not align with current effective inclusionary practices.

Greatest Risk in Our Inclusionary Efforts

The authors' discussion of administrator, teacher and staff collaboration to ensure students are addressed as a class and/or content area, rather than as groups of students, is one of EMBRACE's greatest points of concern and focus. As more parents request their parish school educate all of their children, we continue to see some schools that refuse, based upon perceived scarcity of resources. As a result, we see schools reacting with the implementation of a 20 year old model of special education, that includes an "ownership" model, placing those students with learning differences under the prevue and responsibility of one staff member or in the Catholic school version of a self-contained education center. The authors' outline for assessment and implementation is vital to prevent both of these reactive responses and, assist our schools in first adopting a growth mindset, assessing their current system, establishing a culture of collaboration for student centered learning, and implementing frameworks consistent with high-quality education for all.

In the Meantime

Earlier in our response, I pointed to the risk of blanket solutions. With that said, this begs the question, what do we do in the meantime? If a parent approaches a school today, and the school is not ready, what does the school do today? This is where we find the reactive response. This is the rationale behind the blanket response or solution to get the school through today. What is best practice in the short term? How do we ensure the short-term reaction does not, as it has typically, become the long-term and ensure the outlined methodology is still implemented, in the midst of the implementation of what we know to be lesser than best practice today? Yes, not easy to answer questions and yet, issues relevant to our Catholic schools today. Yet, if we keep central to our mission the Holy Family and the fact that our parish is a family where we work to support and develop all our children, we at very least, keep focused on an inclusionary effort working to implement a model where All are Welcome but also meaningfully served.