Meeting the Challenges of an Inclusive Classroom

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Abstract

The population of Manitoba classrooms has expanded to include a wide range of diverse learners. While this diversity brings with it opportunities for educators, it can also pose significant challenges. Several key components of professional practice enable teachers to promote and implement a fully inclusive classroom environment. An educator's capacities to use differentiated instruction, support emotional needs, and provide professional supports within a larger framework, are necessary for inclusion. The underlying structure in which these components exist may differ, whether labelled under Response to Intervention or Universal Design for Learning, but their commonalities define best practice.

Educators find themselves increasingly challenged by the inclusion of diverse learning populations. All students entering Manitoba classrooms bring components of diversity that go beyond ethnic, racial, linguistic, or cognitive profiles (Katz, 2012). In recent decades, a fully inclusive learning environment has placed new demands upon educators. This is occurring at a time when resources are being continuously limited and public scrutiny is increasingly prominent. In order to meet the challenges of an inclusive classroom, educators require the capacity to differentiate instruction, support emotional competency, and provide professionally competent supports.

Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction can support inclusion and achieve positive outcomes in a number of ways, but there are certain common components of best practice. Regardless of the implementation methodology, key facets within the classroom environment include the use of assessment and the incorporation into a larger Response to Intervention (RTI) framework. Whether the teaching philosophy of the educator is predicated upon brain-based learning or a respect for multiple intelligences, certain elements should be found within a differentiated classroom (Sprenger, 2008). The physical layout of a classroom should incorporate elements of creativity, comfort, and safety (Sprenger, 2008). The social make-up of a classroom should support collaborative learning while ensuring that students develop independence (Heacoux, 2009). Academically, the ideal differentiated classroom incorporates effective assessment and meaningful feedback. These facets of teaching, when brought together to support inclusion, enable students to achieve positive results regardless of how the teacher interprets the need for differentiation (Levin, 2012).

Learning within the differentiated classroom should not occur in isolation, but rather within a larger RTI framework. Within the first tier of RTI, differentiated instruction accommodates a universality of programming to meet the needs of nearly all learners (Katz, 2013). This does not mean a lowering of standards, but rather an alteration in the classroom that makes learning easier for students (Sprenger, 2008). Differentiation further means an alteration in the way that teachers use supports. Resource support should not exist as a separate entity from classroom instruction, but rather should provide supports in assessing learning difficulties and delivering special programming within the classroom (Katz, 2013). Collaborative teaching practices such as co-teaching further enhance this practice. Fostering differentiated instruction requires a whole-school embrace of an inclusive environment, effective assessment, and RTI in order to be successful.

Differentiated instruction thus occurs within a larger cycle that includes teaching, learning, and assessment (Heacoux, 2009). Each element in the cycle is not isolated from the others.
The ability to base teaching on pre-assessments is a valuable component of the whole (Heacoux, 2009). Classroom profiles and data-driven decision making both have roles to play within effective differentiated instruction. This cycle within the classroom then forms a portion of the larger system, thereby supporting an inclusive classroom.

**Emotional Supports**

Fostering an emotionally supportive classroom requires recognizing emotional needs, building relationships, and overcoming perceived limitations of students. An inclusive environment meets the emotional needs of its learners and moves beyond the curriculum outcomes. The emotional component does not trump academics, but is a significant factor in overall student success rates (Tough, 2012). An environment that embraces diversity recognizes the inherent need for human beings to belong to a larger community and acknowledges inclusive education as a fundamental human right (Gordon, 2013). Learning does not occur in isolation from the students and their lives (Katz, 2012). A variety of factors, such as a family’s socioeconomic status, predict future achievement levels before a student enters the school system (American Psychological Association, 2014). Educators are responsible for fostering an environment that supports students both academically and emotionally. The need for teachers to build a supportive and emotionally caring environment does not mean that classrooms should be free of stress or challenge. Indeed, mild competition can be a positive stressor if it serves to challenge and motivate learners (Sprenger, 2008). What is crucial within the inclusive classroom is a positive learning environment that responds to the needs of its learners beyond the academic.

Strong personal connections are the paramount factor in an environment that supports emotional health (Levin, 2012). There are direct correlations among student attendance, behaviour, success, and staff-student connections (Levin, 2012). Upon the establishment of relationships, educators can begin to influence positive traits such as learned optimism and resiliency (Tough, 2012). In a safe learning environment, student voice can begin to take shape in both a classroom and divisional capacity (Gallagher, Samtrock, Woloshyn, Di Petta, & Zopito, 2007). Building hospitable classrooms for students with emotional disabilities may be a considerable professional challenge, but one that is crucial for their success (Naraian, Ferguson, & Thompson, 2012). Educators will likewise benefit as they form connections between recognizing emotions and their professional practice (Timostsuk & Ugaste, 2012). One of the most inherently challenging and yet vital emotional components is the fostering of motivation. Without motivation, self-control and success are unlikely to develop at age appropriate levels (Tough, 2012). None of these emotional variables are possible without strong personal connections to individuals within the school setting.

Providing emotional supports and differentiated instruction while maintaining high academic standards can be overwhelming for teachers who are already stretched too thin in terms of time and resources (Thompkins & Deloney, 1995). Some educators put forward that uncertainty, caused by insufficient professional development, is a key element that is hindering inclusion practices (Van De Putte & De Schauwer, 2013). Others view inclusion as merely another fad within the educational system and are wary of simple solutions that ignore classroom challenges (Levin, 2012). For some educators, different professional development opportunities have been conflicting or have failed to meet their specific needs (Leko & Brownell, 2009). Inclusion presents challenges that can seem insurmountable, but there is a need to respond to the challenge.

**Professional Capacity**

Building professional capacity to support inclusive learning can occur through professional development in terms of RTI supports, data-driven decision-making, or the Three-Block Model.
Professional capacity may require all three elements. Teachers bring with them a whole host of varying experiences and teaching methodologies. Some individuals naturally lean toward a specific teaching style, while others instinctively differentiate the classroom experience (Heacoux, 2009). For a minority of educators, the sharing of open educational resources may lay the foundation for self-directed professional development (Hockings, Brett, & Terentjevs, 2012). Many will require a re-structuring of school systems, in order to create professional learning communities that base their actions on data from research (Earl & Katz, 2006). Educators require the professional capacity to analyse and use data in an informed way.

The RTI pyramid of interventions found within many professional learning communities provides a systematic “best practices” response to students. Educators can no longer rely solely upon tacit knowledge or personal preferences in deciding their professional practice (Earl & Katz, 2006). Professional growth should occur within a collaborative framework for using different supports simultaneously. Using different staff members’ skill-sets requires the opening of classrooms and knowledge of systemic supports. A RTI framework that brings together these components of professional development is required to support inclusive professional practice.

Katz’s (2012) Three-Block Model of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) brings together the various elements needed to address the needs of an inclusive classroom. While many of the elements of universal design exist within other frameworks, the Three-Block Model merges the components of emotional support and professional competency. The first block incorporates social-emotional supports. It introduces multiple intelligences to students and makes them aware of their learning strengths. The second block incorporates elements of differentiated instruction into other facets such as co-teaching, work centres, and thematic units. These elements occur within the first tier of an RTI framework. The third block includes changes to systemic elements of the educational system. It is within this block that responsibility for building capacity and professional development occurs. The Three-Block Model of UDL offers one potential answer to how teachers can address the needs of the inclusive classroom. Regardless of whether UDL or some other framework is used, professional capacity must develop on a system-wide scale.

Conclusion

The requirements of inclusion and a diverse student population have created a significant challenge for educators. The world has changed to a far greater degree than the classroom setting (Levin, 2012). Differentiated instruction, while hardly a new concept, is more crucial than ever in ensuring that a diverse population of students meets high academic standards. In improving daily teaching practice, educators can make the necessary changes to improve graduation rates and other measurements. Successful instruction is possible only in a safe environment that nurtures students’ emotional needs because students bring a whole host of experiences, expectations, and challenges that can hinder their learning. If the classroom is to meet the needs of all students, then it requires a well-trained professional comfortable in providing an inclusive education. Teachers need the capacity to deliver programming within the constraints of the time and resources provided. Each component of differentiation, emotional support, and professional development is required in order to provide the type of education that students need.

References


**About the Author**

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