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Molly Bullock

Diocese of Cleveland, mbullock@dioceseofcleveland.org

Frank W. O'Linn

Diocese of Cleveland, folinn@dioceseofcleveland.org

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Catholic Schools and Inclusive Special Education: A Response from the Field to “Why Inclusion isn’t Coming, It is Already Here”

Molly Bullock¹ and Frank W. O’Linn²

Faggella-Luby and Engel (this issue) trace the cause for inclusion in Catholic schools to the roots of our faith and **uphold it rightly** as integral to our identities as Catholic communities. Making a strong and compelling argument that inclusive education can no longer be viewed as an optional practice within Catholic schools, the authors review available data to illustrate that Catholic schools have been educating students with diverse learning needs for decades, using whatever means possible. Moreover, the article is a call for more nuanced data and research on the state of inclusion in Catholic schools. Faggella-Luby and Engel outline a roadmap for transforming the narrative around inclusion in Catholic schools by reviewing research, models, trends, and surfacing dangerous misconceptions. Highlighting the advantages for all learners to have classrooms in which all students are present to receive instruction informed by each students’ specific learning strengths and challenges, the authors urge that if we want to meet the needs of all of our students, then we need to take the emphasis off of labels and instead design instruction that is student-centered.

Living Inclusion in Cleveland

The Catholic Diocese of Cleveland shares in the authors’ conviction that the call for inclusion is central to who we are as Catholic institutions. Recognizing the limitations in many of our schools,

¹ Special Education Coordinator, Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, OH

² Superintendent of Schools, Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, OH

the diocese responded to this calling by establishing the Better Together initiative (<https://www.dioceseofcleveland.org/offices/formation-education/catholic-schools/better-together>), a system-wide movement with the goal of providing consistent policies and much-needed resources to build the capacity for inclusive education across its Catholic schools. After more than a year of planning and fundraising, the professional learning phase commenced in spring of 2018, and since then we have encountered many of the challenges to inclusion that the authors identify. Chief among them is what the authors term the “nervousness” of teachers in the first stages of becoming more inclusive.

Addressing Challenges

Where this trepidation presents as resistance to inclusive practices, we often observe in educators that the root cause is an underlying fear that they will not adequately meet the learning needs of their increasingly diverse classrooms. The authors point out that such fear is not unfounded, noting the dearth of specific training provided in general education teacher preparation. In order to sustain and grow inclusive education successfully we believe that ongoing, job-embedded professional learning is essential for all educational professionals involved. For this reason, the Better Together initiative supported the identification and training of an existing faculty member at every participating building to serve in the role of inclusion coordinator, with the goal of deepening the faculty’s understanding of the knowledge and skills necessary to teach all of the students in their classrooms. Even so, progress has at times been painstaking.

Reasonable Accommodations

Faggella-Luby and Engel assert that reasonable accommodations are frequently all that is needed to allow students with high incidence disabilities to succeed within a general education classroom. This is consistent with our experience, but now in our second year of training, we have found the challenge of equipping educators with the techniques and skills to utilize these accommodations effectively to be deceptively difficult. One challenge lies in teaching educational professionals within the general education setting to understand what these accommodations are and how they can be incorporated into everyday instructional practices to benefit all learners. Another, and perhaps greater challenge, exists in imparting why accommodations are beneficial. We frequently encounter educators who initially view accommodations as providing an unfair advantage to some students, rather than seeing them as necessary supports to allow all students to demonstrate their full knowledge and ability.

Shifting Mindset

Regarding teacher training, we see a most important shift being not just that of techniques but also a need to shift educators’ mindsets. The authors’ emphasis on the importance of teachers’ views of disability certainly resonates with us. Similarly, the misconception that dismisses inclusive

practices as “just good instruction” without the humility to examine current teaching for evidence-based practices is another that we encounter initially. We wonder if any scholarship from the burgeoning field of mindsets in education, by researchers such as Carol Dweck, David Yeager, and others, has applications specifically for growing the inclusive practices of educators in Catholic schools (see Dweck & Yeager, 2019, for more).

The continuum of inclusion placements also provides a useful summary and insight for our work. In our schools, consultation/collaborative teaching is currently the most prevalent inclusion strategy. The authors’ research highlighting the benefits of shifting from this practice to that of full inclusion to provide more equitable opportunities will certainly inform our strategies for Catholic schools.

Discarding Disability Labels and Low Expectations

Faggella-Luby and Engel challenge a prevalent societal view that perceives students labeled as having a disability as inherently having a deficit—a stigma that is exacerbated when their learning environments are characterized by narrow and fixed expectations for how students learn. We welcome further research and discussion of how our educational structures may better evolve away from this construct to one in which our classrooms meet each student where he or she is along the developmental continuum and successfully deliver instruction with individualized supports to overcome their personal challenges, and tap into students’ unique strengths and interests.

A Movement

The authors describe an ambitious plan to transform the narrative around disability by improving inclusive approaches and results in Catholic schools, a dramatic shift in culture that will take sustained effort to realize. Precisely because such shifts are for the long term, we in the diocese of Cleveland like to say that Better Together is not a program; it is a movement. While contemporary society focuses on competition, comparison, and ranking, inclusion may be a way that Catholic schools more fully live the values of our faith. Witnessing to the love of God and others that is the bedrock of Catholic Social Teaching, may our Catholic schools become examples of the ways in which all of God’s children can learn better together.

References

- Dweck, C. S., & Yeager, D. S. (2019). Mindsets: A view from two eras. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 14*(3), 481-496. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691618804166>