

SUCCESSFUL INCLUSIVE PRACTICES IN MIDDLE AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This article describes what is known about ways in which middle and secondary school educators have improved curricula, instruction, and assessment practices and reorganized to achieve increased collaboration and responsiveness for all students' needs. It describes seven prominently used instructional strategies and four reorganization strategies that allow secondary school communities to become successful at educating a diverse student population. A field-based example of a high school illustrates six "best practices" that emerged from interviews with inclusive educators: administrative support, ongoing professional development, collaboration, communication, instructional responsiveness, and expanded authentic assessment approaches.

Across North America, school district data reveal a growing number of children with disabilities fully and successfully participating as members of general education elementary, middle, and secondary classrooms (Villa & Thousand, 2005). Recent federal legislation sets the stage for increased numbers of students with disabilities to be educated in general education middle and secondary classrooms. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA) requirement that students with disabilities access the general education curriculum in the least restrictive environment combines with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) requirement that all students have access to highly qualified teachers to create a context for general and special educators to collaborate to provide students access to core content in general education classes.

Despite knowledge of benefits of and key factors for promoting inclusive schooling, documented examples of inclusive education programs at the secondary level are not as abundant as at the elementary level (Grady with Gloeckler, 2004). This article describes what is known about ways in which middle and secondary school educators have improved curricula, instruction, and assessment practices and reorganized to achieve increased collaboration and responsiveness for all students' needs. It also provides a field-based example of a high school that exemplifies inclusive practices.

CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, AND ASSESSMENT IMPROVEMENTS

What follows are descriptions of seven of the most prominent methods middle and secondary educators employ to increase their responsiveness to the needs of all learners. The seven methods are: a) differentiated instruction, b) interdisciplinary curriculum, c) use of technology, d) student collaboration and peer-mediated instruction, e) supports and accommodations for curricular inclusion, f) teaching responsibility, peace-making, and self-determination, and g) authentic assessment of student performance.

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION: MOVING TOWARD

A UNIVERSAL DESIGN FRAMEWORK

Because of the unique learning characteristics of each middle or secondary student who enters the classroom everyday, differentiation in curriculum development, instructional delivery, and assessment must occur to facilitate meaningful and effective instruction not only for students perceived as disabled, at risk, or gifted, but also "allegedly

average" students (Cole, 2001; Tomlinson, 2001). Differentiation has evolved to what now is known as universal design for learning (UDL). UDL is an educational application of universal design principles developed and used by architects, product designers, engineers, and environmental design researchers. It is used to make products, communications, and the physical environment usable to as many people as possible at little or no extra cost. UDL, then, refers to the creation of differentiated learning experiences that minimize the need for modifications for particular circumstances or individuals (Meyer & Rose, 2002; Udvari-Solner, Villa, & Thousand, 2005). UDL makes curriculum, materials, and school environments usable for students from different backgrounds and with different learning styles (Meyer & Rose, 2002), thus, decreasing segregation of students based on their different performance levels or perceived abilities.

Udvari-Solner et al. (2005) illustrate ways to apply UDL principles to provide all students with multiple means of representation, multiple means of engagement, and multiple means of expression. To initiate a universal design approach, they advise secondary educators to think about three distinct curriculum access points – content, process, and product. The content access point concerns what is taught, what we want students to learn, know, and do. The process access point concerns how students go about making sense of what they are learning. The product access point concerns how students demonstrate what is learned. At the content access point, secondary educators may consider how to integrate curriculum across the disciplines or how to include the teaching of responsibility, peacemaking, and self-determination as part of the curriculum. At the process access point, they may consider how technology and peer mediated instructional approaches could be incorporated into instruction (Udvari-Solner, Thousand, Villa, Quiocho, & Kelly, 2005). At the product access point, they may consider how to augment standardized assessment with authentic assessment approaches.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CURRICULUM

Interdisciplinary curricular approaches arose from dissatisfaction with subject-driven curriculum organization and delivery. An interdisciplinary curricular orientation expressly integrates one or more disciplines to examine a central theme, issue, problem, topic, or experience (Wineburg & Grossman, 2000). An interdisciplinary curricular approach represents an alternative to departmental isolation among those who teach different subjects. It empowers cross-disciplinary partners to jointly prioritize what

should be taught and what should be eliminated. It combats narrow specialization and reduces the fragmentation of subjects and schedules into allotted time periods.

Most true to the interdisciplinary philosophy is the middle and high school level practice of uniting teachers of separate disciplines in co-teaching partnerships to address a selected set of issues. Teachers and students participate in a learning partnership to examine one area in depth from complex and multiple perspectives. Themes selected for instructional attention are big ideas relevant to the students to whom they will be taught.

In the past, students with disabilities often met with failure in general education because content areas were unrelated, out of context, practiced only a few minutes per day, and without consideration of generalization and transfer. Interdisciplinary curriculum integration shows students how different subject areas influence their lives, thereby demonstrating the relevance of what is to be learned (Ackerman & Perkins, 1989; Beane, 1997). It provides advantages for students with and without disabilities by assisting them to see patterns across the chaos of diverse bodies of content (Wineburg & Grossman, 2000).

USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Until recently, technology was only in the possession of a few experts such as the computer lab teacher or those who designed or programmed augmentative communication systems for students with communication limitations. Today, the International Society for Technology in Education has established National Educational Technology Standards (NETS) with accompanying performance indicators that direct teachers to use technology to meet the needs of all students. Namely, NETS require teachers to a) promote safe and healthy use of technology; b) model and teach legal and ethical use of technology; c) apply technology to affirm diversity and empower learners with diverse backgrounds, characteristics, and abilities; and d) facilitate equitable access to technology for all students. Middle and secondary teachers can use a broad array of technological tools to facilitate inclusive education. Low-tech approaches could involve raising the font size and changing the color of text to simplify and highlight visual images or using commonly available educational software such as Inspiration (<http://www.inspiration.com>) to enable students to record and connect ideas "rapid fire" which Inspiration then translates into an outline form. Online tools include a host of online inquiry tools such as WebQuest (<http://webquest.sdsu.edu>) that allow students to spend

more time analyzing rather than looking for information. Remaining current with this rapidly changing aspect of education requires effort. But, beyond knowing the current "laundry list" of available technology is the more essential capacity to select and use technology that suits individual student needs.

STUDENT COLLABORATION AND PEER-MEDIATED INSTRUCTION

Until recently, missing from the collaborative equation in secondary schools were the students themselves. Thousand, Villa, and Nevin (2002) argue that secondary educators have a responsibility to model collaboration by sharing their decision-making and instructional power with students by inviting students to collaborate a) as members of planning teams, determining accommodations for themselves or classmates with and without disabilities; b) as advocates for themselves and for classmates during meetings (e.g., individual educational plan meeting for a student with a disability) and other major events which determine a student's future educational and post-school choices; c) as a social and logistical support to a classmate as a peer partner or as a member of a Circle of Friends (Falvey, Forest, Pearpoint, & Rosenberg, 2002); d) as coaches, invited by teachers to provide feedback about the effectiveness of instructional and discipline procedures and decisions; and e) as members of school governance committees (e.g., school board).

Although the previously mentioned collaborative roles facilitate meaningful participation of students with disabilities in school, they do not capitalize upon students' instructional power. Peer-mediated instruction does. Peer-mediated instruction refers to any teaching arrangement in which students are instructional agents for other students. Cooperative group learning approaches and peer tutoring or partner learning strategies are two forms of peer-mediated instruction that support inclusive education (Thousand et al., 2002).

COOPERATIVE GROUP LEARNING

Cooperative learning is supported by a rich research base giving evidence for its power to enable students "to learn and work in environments where their individual strengths are recognized and individual needs are addressed" (Sapon-Shevin, Ayres, & Duncan, 2002, p. 209). Common to the various models of cooperative learning (e.g., Davidson, 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Kagan, 1992) are five conditions: a) a joint task or learning activity suitable for group work, b) small-group learning in teams of five or fewer members, c) a focus on the use of cooperative behaviors,

d) positive interdependence through team members' encouragement of one another's learning, and e) individual accountability and responsibility for participation and learning of each team member.

PARTNER LEARNING

Partner learning or peer tutor systems can be same-age or cross-age and can be established within a single classroom, across classes, or across an entire school. Partner learning systems build relationships among students and offer a cost-effective way of enhancing engaged learning time.

Evidence of the social, instructional, and cost benefits of tutoring are abundant (e.g., LaPlant & Zane, 2002; McMaster, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2002; Thousand et al., 2002). Students receiving instruction from tutors experience learning gains, interpersonal skill development, and heightened self-esteem. Good and Brophy (1997) suggest that the quality of instruction delivered by trained tutors may be superior to that of adults for at least three reasons: students use more age-appropriate and meaningful language and examples; having recently learned what they are to teach, they are familiar with their tutee's potential frustrations; and, they tend to be more direct than adults.

Tutors experience benefits similar to those of their tutees. Namely, their interpersonal skills are developed and self-esteem may be enhanced. Further, tutors report that they understand the concepts, procedures, and operations they teach at a much deeper level than they did before instructing. This likely is due to the metacognitive activity in which they engaged while preparing to teach.

SUPPORTS AND ACCOMMODATIONS FOR CURRICULAR INCLUSION

Even when secondary educators use universal design in learning principles to differentiate curriculum and instruction, some students will still need personalized modifications to access the curriculum in general education settings (Giangreco & Putnam, 1991). Specific curricular modifications range from curriculum as is (no modification necessary), assistance as necessary (peer or adult assists), or material adaptations (changing or substituting instructional materials) to multilevel outcomes (same activity with different expectations for mastery) or goals outside of the content area (a focus on social, communication, or life skills during content-area activities). To illustrate, a curricular modification that goes beyond mastery of the specific academic content in science would be when a student with a significant disability is not expected to demonstrate understanding of the periodic table of the elements, but instead has as

goals the proper handling of materials and following of three-step directions from a peer partner in a lab situation. Clearly, the more interactive, differentiated, and hands-on the instructional activity, is the less likely it will be that any major modifications will be necessary.

TEACHING RESPONSIBILITY, PEACEMAKING, AND SELF-DETERMINATION

Among the students considered the most challenging to educate within the current school organizational structure are those who demonstrate high rates of rule-violating behavior and maladaptive social interactions. Adversity at home and in the community negatively affects an increasing number of youth and their ability and motivation to learn. The educator's job has broadened from providing effective instruction and personalized accommodations to acknowledging and attempting to address the stressors in students' lives by offering mental health and other human services supports on campus. Because of these challenges, explicit instruction in the concepts and skills associated with responsibility, peacemaking, and self-determination have become curriculum priorities (Villa, Udis, & Thousand, 2002).

TEACHING RESPONSIBILITY

Requisite to students learning responsible values, attitudes, and behaviors is their perception that somebody in the school community genuinely cares about them. Educators can demonstrate caring by validating students' efforts and achievements. They also can directly teach responsibility by a) setting and enforcing limits to ensure safety, b) establishing a school-wide discipline system that promotes the learning of responsibility, and c) directly instructing students in pro-social communication skills, anger management, and impulse control techniques (Villa et. al., 2002). Curwin and Mendler(1991) and Glasser(1998) acknowledge that responsibility based behavior management approaches conflict as a natural part of life. They cast the educator in the facilitator role of resolving conflicts rather than into the police role of enforcing "if-then" consequences (e.g., three tardies equals a detention; 10 absences results in a grade of "F" in the missed class). In a responsibility-based discipline approach, a teacher's response to a rule-violating behavior is not prescribed, but dependent upon a variety of factors (e.g., the frequency and intensity of the behavior, the number of other people exhibiting the behavior). The teacher's response can range from reminders, warnings, re-directions, cues, and self-monitoring techniques to behavioral contracts, direct teaching of alternative behaviors, and behavior support plans.

STUDENTS AS PEACEMAKERS

One way to incorporate the development of student responsibility into the culture and curriculum of the school is to turn conflict management back to the students by using students as peer mediators. Students who are trained to be mediators are available during school hours to conduct mediations at the request of students, teachers, or administrators. Emerging data suggest that peer mediation programs are successful in decreasing discipline referrals, fights, student suspensions, and vandalism while improving school attendance (Schrupf & Jansen, 2002).

PROMOTING SELF DETERMINATION

Active participation of students in their own education can be facilitated by explicitly teaching students with disabilities self-determination skills. Self-determination emerges when an individual is given the opportunity to experience choice making, decision-making, problem-solving, goal-setting and attainment, self-advocacy, self-observation and evaluation, internal locus of control, and self-knowledge (Wehmeyer, Sands, Doll, & Palmer, 1997). One tactic for teaching self-determination is to implement self-determination curricula such as Field and Hoffman's (2002) Steps to Self-Determination. Some secondary general and special educators have collaborated to integrate self-determination into the general education curriculum. For example, Blum, Lipsett, and Yocom (2002) describe how literature circles positively influenced students' self-awareness, self-selection, and self-expression in discussing English literature. Yet another way to promote self-determination is to explicitly teach students how to lead their own Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings (McGahey-Kovacs, 1995). Hapner and Imel (2002) reported positive results using this approach in terms of student commitment to and involvement in their own learning.

AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Traditional assessments that rely primarily on decontextualized recall of knowledge not only are out of step with the ways in which students naturally use and show knowledge, but they maintain a deficit-oriented profile of students with disabilities, who predictably perform below their non-disabled peers on these measures. Authentic assessments have evolved out of a need for more realistic and responsive educational outcome measures. Authentic assessment occurs when students are expected to perform, produce, or otherwise demonstrate skills that represent real life learning demands in and out of the classroom, without contrived and

standardized conditions (Lewin & Shoemaker, 1998; Tweit-Hull, Thousand, Bishop-Smith, & Falvey, 2000). To illustrate, an authentic assessment of written expression could be a portfolio that includes several samples of writing representing conceptual ideas, rough drafts, self-edited papers, and final versions. It might include products such as poems, letters, or research papers that illustrate ability to use various forms of written expression. Throughout the portfolio experience, the student self-evaluates and sets personal goals for continued progress.

REORGANIZING FOR COLLABORATION AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL

Secondary school communities that are successful at educating a diverse student population are those that have a) reorganized the school day through block scheduling, b) allowed for flexible and fluid student groupings via detracking, c) fostered and supported collaborative planning and teaching partnerships, and d) provided strong administrative support and leadership. Each of these four restructuring practices is described below.

EXTENDED BLOCK SCHEDULING

Extended block scheduling organizes at least part of the daily schedule into larger blocks of time that exceed sixty minutes (Canady & Rettig, 2001; Cawelti, 1994). Through block scheduling of core curriculum classes, a) the teacher-student ratio is reduced (e.g., from 180 to 80 students per teacher), b) the number of transitions students must experience is minimized; and c) opportunities and time for more personalization of instruction are increased for all students. Block scheduling reflects the kind of work environment secondary school graduates face in the 21st century -- short-term project work in which people enter, form relationships, and exit. When special educators and other support personnel such as school counselors and paraprofessionals are added to the block-scheduled teaching team, students with and without disabilities are provided with additional personal attention, advisement, and support.

DETRACKING THROUGH HETEROGENEOUS GROUPING

The effectiveness of ability grouping, referred to as tracking, has not been substantiated in the research literature and, in fact, has resulted in negative outcomes for many students (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Sapon-Shevin, 1994). In tracked schools, students who are assigned to classes in the lowest track often experience diluted curricula and limited opportunity to experience courses (e.g., algebra) that are prerequisites for postsecondary opportunities. Inclusive secondary educators, therefore, are

grouping students heterogeneously in order to de-track. For adolescents to be prepared to operate within the larger, complex heterogeneous community into which they will enter as adults, they need de-tracked high school experiences that reflect the range of abilities, ethnicities, languages, economic levels, ages, and other human dimensions within a community. When secondary educators group students heterogeneously, all students have access to the core curriculum, in alignment with IDEIA and NCLB requirements.

MULTIPLE INSTRUCTIONAL AGENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

In many inclusive middle and secondary schools, educators and other support personnel have redefined their roles to that of collaborative team members who jointly plan, instruct, and solve the daily problems of teaching in today's diverse classrooms. A secondary teacher with a collaborative support team to assist in instruction can more readily access assistance from specialists (e.g., special educators, reading specialists) and related services personnel (e.g., speech and language pathologists, occupational and physical therapists, psychologists, paraprofessionals) without the need to refer students to special education to gain support. Having multiple instructional agents in the classroom increases the instructor/student ratio and immediacy in diagnosing and responding to student needs.

Paraprofessionals, special educators, and other related services personnel are there to enable students to access the general education curriculum rather than to supplant curriculum access by pulling the student out of the instructional activities in which other students are engaged. When multiple adults are available to provide support in a classroom, an "only as much as necessary" support principle needs to be observed. For example, if a paraprofessional is in the classroom, this person becomes a co-teacher and a support to the class rather than a "Velcroed" personal assistant to one lone student.

Several collaborative teaching approaches have proven to be successful to guide secondary educators in their partnerships (Villa, 2002; Villa et al., 2004). The approaches include: (1) consultation, where support personnel provide advisement to the secondary educator; (2) supportive co-teaching, where the secondary educator takes the lead role and support personnel rotate among students to provide support; (3) parallel co-teaching approach, where support personnel and the secondary educator instruct different heterogeneous groups of students; (4) complementary co-teaching, where support personnel do something to supplement or complement the instruction provided by the secondary

educator (e.g., models note taking on a transparency, paraphrases the teacher's statements); and (5) team teaching, where support personnel and secondary educator co-teach along side one another and share responsibility for planning, teaching, and assessing the progress of all students in the class. Some co-teaching approaches (e.g., complementary and team teaching) require greater commitment to, comfort with, and skill in collaborative planning and role release (i.e., transferring one's specialized instructional responsibilities over to someone else). It is recommended that collaborative teams use all five of the above approaches, as needed, based on the curriculum demands of a unit or lesson and student learning characteristics and needs.

ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP

It is well documented that the role of leadership personnel in crafting inclusive learning communities is critical to the success of such efforts (Cawalti, 1994). For instance, in a survey of educator's attitudes toward inclusive education conducted in five U.S. states and one Canadian province, Villa, Thousand, Meyers, and Nevin (1996) found that the degree of administrative support for the practice was the most powerful predictor of a general educator's positive feelings toward inclusive education. Villa and Thousand (2005) have delineated five essential actions administrators of middle and secondary schools must take to facilitate inclusive practices: a) build consensus for a vision of inclusive schooling, b) develop educators' skills and confidence to be inclusive educators by arranging on-going meaningful professional development, c) create incentives (e.g., time to meet, training, listening to staff concerns, collaborative decision-making) for people to risk to change to inclusive schooling practices, d) reorganize and expand human and other teaching resources, and e) plan for and take actions to help the community see and get excited about a new vision. Administrative practices associated with successful secondary inclusive schools include data-based decision making, conscious attention to transition of new students into ninth grade, and the creation of small learning communities that allow for connections and personalization among both staff and students (Grady with Gloeckler, 2004; Grady & Villa, 2004).

IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE PRACTICES: THE VOICES OF SECONDARY EDUCATORS

To gain a better understanding of how secondary educators facilitated inclusive education, Liston (2004) conducted individualized interviews over a three week period with 10 general educators and 10 special

educators working in co-teaching relationships in a large, urban, southern California multi-cultural and multi-lingual comprehensive high school. These educators were interviewed because of their participation in a university-district partnership to promote co-teaching as a way of encouraging inclusive practice as well as comply with IDEA and NCLB requirements for access to the core curriculum and access to highly qualified teachers (Liston & Thousand, 2004). Interviewees were asked to honestly respond to a series of structured interview questions regarding their successful inclusive practices, observed student and teacher outcomes, and needed steps for improvement. Interview transcripts analyzed to identify patterns and regularities, with emerging words used to create categorical themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Six "best practice" themes emerged from the interviews: a) administrative support, b) ongoing professional development, c) collaboration, d) communication, e) instructional responsiveness, and f) expanded authentic assessment approaches.

THEME 1: ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

Most interviewees reported that an administrative team with strong leadership skills is imperative to the success of inclusive practices. One educator explained, "Administrators are key figures on campus and must model acceptance of all students and celebrate the diversity within the school community." A number of special educators noted that high expectations should be required of all educators and that administrators must hold everyone accountable. For these teachers administrative support meant such things as equitable distribution of students eligible for special education among core and elective classes and holding firm with faculty that all students have access to and participate in general education classes.

THEME 2: ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Even though most interviewees were seasoned educators, every single one emphasized the importance of continued professional development. They reported that while their school was making steady progress, there were still educators who did not use inclusive educational practices such as those described in this article. "Fellow colleagues need to get on the bandwagon," one educator shared. Areas identified for professional development were universal lesson plan design, differentiated instruction, and methods for resolving differences. Visitations to other school sites were recommended as a way to gain and exchange instructional and organizational strategies.

THEME 3: COLLABORATION

Every interviewee reported collaboration among staff members as the key to student success. Many noted that a well-rounded support system could be put into place for a student when the family and all those who worked with a student effectively collaborated. Collaboration meant a redefinition of roles for everyone, especially special educators. The majority of the special educators interviewed described the challenge of not taking on too many responsibilities. As one special educator explained, "My current responsibilities include being an enrollment clerk, the attendance police, the suspension agent, and the crisis counselor when I really should be in the classroom teaching!" To counter this tendency for special educators' roles to mushroom, the school has reorganized teachers and students into interdisciplinary, rather than discipline-specific, configurations known as families. This reorganization has made supporting students easier for the special education staff because they "aren't spread so thin."

THEME 4: COMMUNICATION

Interviewees overwhelmingly reported that open communication among the teaching staff provided the foundation of trust needed for teaching partnerships. As one educator commented on the positive flow of communication, "Two individuals thinking and talking is better than one doing it all." Conversation keeps the ball rolling." All respondents recognized the mutual give and take or reciprocity that occurs when they co-teach. As one educator stated, "General educators will naturally have the content and special educators will have the knowledge on instructional strategies, accommodations, and modifications."

THEME 5: INSTRUCTIONAL RESPONSIVENESS

Instructional responsiveness to the individual learning needs of all students can occur, as one general educator reported, through her "hands-on experiences where students are engaged in helping one another, teaching one another, and sharing their talents. She further commented "this far surpasses the outcomes when a student is assigned a one-on-one aide." Another general educator remarked that, as an inclusive educator, he needed to think "more deeply about how to engage all students, and give students ample opportunities to receive multi-modality instruction." All interviewees expressed that they experienced an "increased sensitivity to the emotional, academic, and physical needs of the students" and that this leads to "increased opportunities for students to succeed."

Interviews clarified how co-teaching allowed both general and special educators to try new arrangements in the presentation of curricular content. One special educator emphasized that students enjoyed multiple educators in the classroom. "It breaks up the presentation style, and the monotony that can happen when just one educator presents for the entire period." Another remarked, "When all students are included, the stigma of being in special education is removed. Quite often, peers do not know who is in special education, and who is not."

THEME 6: EXPANDED AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT APPROACHES

When interviewed, special educators reported an increase in the use of authentic assessments in the general education classroom. "The general educators are looking at the whole child rather than one set of test results. They seem to see the big picture." One special educator described a project-based assessment where students had the choice of presenting to the entire class, a small group, or (because of shyness) to the teacher alone. Reporting on the academic success of co-taught students, a general educator shared, "With alternative assessments, students with disabilities are showing that they can keep up with the academic expectations. No, they may not be getting A's, but they are passing, and they are doing their own work. As they do better and better, they become more confident, and empowered to keep up academically. On to college!"

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW FINDINGS

In summary, despite the challenges, the interviewed secondary educators were steadfast in their belief in the value of inclusive education. They see students, once segregated in special schools and classrooms, succeeding in the general education environment. Many respondents reported that the inclusive classroom offered an environment in which students could "fit in" and where students become compassionate about one another's needs. One general educator remarked that when students have opportunities to "just be with one another" the stereotyping and stigma associated with disabilities decrease.

CONCLUSIONS: WHAT WORKS, WORKS FOR ALL

Historically, the concept of including students with disabilities at the secondary level often was challenged due to the strong "academic" nature of the secondary curriculum. The value of subjects such as history, science, and mathematics was questioned for students with significant disabilities, who were thought to benefit most from alternative functional

curricula. Such rigorous content was questioned for students with mild disabilities and economic disadvantages, who instead were offered simplified or "watered down" versions of the core curriculum. What this article and the other articles in this issue illustrate is how middle and high school teachers can teach a broader-based, creativity-oriented curriculum using curricular units and activities that accommodate the characteristics of a more diverse array of youth while simultaneously promoting a sense of community and common good within the classroom.

Much has changed in the American high school since 1975, when the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (now IDEIA) first set out the rights of students with disabilities to a free appropriate public education. The advances achieved in the three decades since 1975 can be viewed as a tribute to the ingenuity and creativity of American secondary educators, their administrators, and the advocates and parents of students with disabilities. The occasion of this themed issue offered an opportunity to examine seven instructional and four organizational practices that have allowed for the successful education of a diverse secondary student population. These practices and others not highlighted in this article (e.g., culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy, the application of Multiple Intelligence and constructivist learning theories) make it possible for secondary educators to see the presence of youth with disabilities in secondary classrooms not as a problem but as a gift – a gift, because these youth require and push the implementation of the very educational best practices that have the potential of benefiting every student (Udvari-Solner, et. al, 2005).

The testimonials of the 20 secondary educators interviewed for this article reinforce past findings on what promotes successful inclusion in secondary schools. Teachers named several of the best practices examined in this article as core to their work. Specifically, they identified differentiated and peer-mediated instruction as well as authentic assessment as salient instructional practices. Key organizational practices were administrative leadership, particularly in professional development, together with teacher collaboration through detracking and co-teaching in "family" configurations of students and faculty. Comments of the interviewed secondary educators also reinforce the notion of students with disabilities being a gift to education. As one high school general educator reflected, "My attitude has changed. I once had a negative attitude about having students with disabilities in my class and saw it as a burden. Now, working with the special educator, I see the changes, and look forward to making education work to ensure the success of all students."

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