A Commitment to Change: One District’s Journey Toward Inclusion

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Abstract
Introduction by: Ellen Contopidis, PhD Associate Professor, Nazareth College

As a teacher educator preparing future inclusive educators, I often find myself responding to my students’ experiences with inclusion as “bad examples of a good idea.” The common element of these bad examples is that they are often the description of a place, a classroom, a service, a teacher or a child. Never do these bad examples reflect a philosophy or a culture within a system. Dr. Harold Leve's leadership of transforming his school to an inclusive instructional environment is founded in a strong vision of social justice. The tools of collaboration, coteaching, consultant models, common planning and quality professional development were all used along the journey. Yet, tools they were and would have been ineffective if not grounded in a vision that allowed a transformation to a "mindset of a more inclusive philosophy." Hildenbrand and Leve are very pragmatic in their description of the journey. They provide specific details that can be replicated or morphed to be used in other school systems. They also clearly demonstrate that leadership is key to transforming a school's culture. Active leadership is an important catalyst for system change.

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Chapter in Duets and Dialogue: Voices on Inclusive Practices in Our Schools, edited by Marie Cianca and Cathy Freytag. The full book can be found here: http://www.inclusion-ny.org/duet-dialogue

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Reading 4: A Commitment to Change: One District’s Journey Toward Inclusion

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A Commitment to Change: One District’s Journey towards Inclusion

Susan Hildenbrand and Harold Leve

Introduction

“This is an inclusion model; we acknowledge the challenges, and we figure out – together – how to make it work. We don’t abandon people who are having trouble. We don’t celebrate “I won” unaware or indifferent to those who are struggling” (Sapon-Shevin, 2007, p.7).

With the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001, the educational system assesses the majority of students with disabilities using the same statewide standards-based assessments as their general education peers. Similarly, this legislation requires schools to look at different service-delivery options for special education (Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). As a result, districts are placing more students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms with their general education classmates (Bouck, 2007). In fact, almost half of all students with disabilities are served in general education classrooms with their non-disabled peers for more than 79% of the school day (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

However, it is not a simple or easy task to make this move to placing students in inclusive classrooms instead of a traditional segregated or pullout system of delivery. East Rochester Elementary School, under the leadership of Dr. Harold Leve, and working collaboratively with Donald Shuryn, the districts’ special education coordinator, did just that and began the amazing journey towards an inclusive elementary school where all learners are welcomed as a part of their learning community.

It Will Never Happen! Where Do We Start?

Even though East Rochester Elementary School had primarily self-contained classrooms for many years as the service option for special education services, there was little academic and social growth for the students in these classrooms within this traditional service delivery model. At the time of the beginning of the transformation, there was also a first cohort of students placed in an integrated kindergarten classroom. As this group of students began their educational experiences, we, as a school, began the transition from self-contained to inclusion. In addition, the New York State Education Department audited the school district’s special education department in the early 2000s. The 2003-04 NYSED School Report Card Information about Students with Disabilities reported the percentage of students at East Rochester Elementary identified with disabilities was 15.3% at the time, which was above the statewide average of 11.9%. The 2003-04 report card also showed that 14.2% of the district’s special education students were in segregated settings, compared to the statewide average of 6.6%.

Therefore, Dr. Leve was even more convinced that collapsing the self-contained classrooms and replacing them with co-taught, inclusive classrooms would be a positive step to
breaking the social barriers between the students with disabilities and typical students while at the same time possibly improving scores on state-wide exams. Dr. Leve and his support team thoroughly researched the benefits of inclusion for students with and without disabilities and acted on the school’s vision of social justice for all learners in his building by setting up inclusive classrooms (Hunt, Hirose-Hatae, Doering, Karasoff, & Goetz 2000; Peck, Staub, Gallucci, and Schwartz 2004).

This unyielding, transparent, and continuous administrative support directly affects the viability of the decision to commit to this philosophical shift in the placement of students with disabilities within a school hierarchy. Among teachers who co-teach, administrative support is frequently stated as the number one need that is instrumental in the in the success of the teachers’ collaboration (Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie, 2007). If the commitment to inclusion is not fully supported by the principal it is difficult to make this paradigm shift in how a school delivers special education services. As Friend and Cook (2004) discuss, administrators must possess a “general understanding of the importance of collaboration, the role of the administrator in fostering a school climate supportive of collaboration, and enough knowledge about collaborative activities to make them a reality” (p. 282).

Dr. Leve speaks the language of inclusion, creates, and supports opportunities for his teachers to be able to successfully collaborate in this new model of delivery, including professional development opportunities surrounding co-teaching. More importantly, Dr. Leve is present at all trainings centered on inclusion and co-teaching and continues to provide opportunities for further educational opportunities in differentiation and collaboration. This professional development agenda resulted in collaboration between Dr. Leve and professors from St. John Fisher College, who provided training for this inclusive model.

However, this inclusive pedagogy was not widely accepted at the beginning, and many in the school thought it was a concept that would never happen, would certainly not last and would not produce the growth in assessments that was predicted. Dr. Leve pushed on, eliminated one self-contained classroom at a time, and watched the positive results begin to appear.

**Let the Journey Begin: Baby Steps**

The transformation of the elementary school began with the elimination of the first of the established self-contained classrooms, the K-1-2 classroom. During the planning year before this classroom was dissolved, Dr. Leve, with administrative input, sought out the general education teacher that would be open to an inclusive classroom and would be willing to collaborate with the temporarily displaced special educator teacher to plan and deliver differentiated instruction for all learners. When these two teachers agreed to be a part of this inaugural inclusive classroom, Dr. Leve formally reassigned the special education teacher to co-teach in this general education classroom at the first grade level, and the teacher assistant was utilized across several classrooms. According to Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2007), in order for co-teaching to be a successful pairing, there needs to be a level of choice and
volunteerism on the part of the co-teachers. Although Dr. Leve purposely approached certain teachers and encouraged them to think about becoming partners in an inclusive classroom, he did not mandate this situation, but allowed for a comfortable level of teacher choice.

Dr. Leve also worked very closely with the district coordinator for the Committee on Special Education, Donald Shuryn, and through a collaborative effort, they made the commitment to draft Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that offered an integrated classroom as a placement option. This co-taught classroom was not presented as an option on the continuum of services prior to this transformation to inclusive education. The students with disabilities were then returned to the general education classrooms, including the co-taught classroom, and the remaining students were supported by other special education teachers in a consultant model. The inclusion experiment began...

The Journey Continues: Next Steps

Each year after the initial inclusive, co-taught classroom was launched, the remaining two self-contained classrooms at the 3-4 and 5-6 level were also closed, and the students with disabilities assigned to these classrooms were placed back into general education classrooms. As with any new referendum for change, there were growing pains from the faculty and staff, and a small number of students left the school to return to other more restrictive placements in other settings. The early resistance to integrating special education students into general education classrooms can best be expressed as a long-standing, traditional mindset that general education students are the responsibility of the general education teachers and special education students are the responsibility of the special education teachers. Even though several teachers volunteered to teach in integrated classrooms, they still needed to change their mindsets. For example, at the start of integrated classes, the expectation was that all instruction would take place in the general education classroom. What was found was that some of the special education teachers were still taking “their” special education students to other classrooms for their instruction.

To transform this mindset to a more inclusive philosophy, the participating teachers were provided professional development about inclusive practices and how to deliver all instruction within the four classroom walls. Next, the “extra” special education classrooms were gently absorbed and utilized by other service providers, thereby providing the physical constraints to support the inclusive mindset. Finally, the teachers were encouraged to think and talk about all students being the responsibility of all teachers, regardless of classification. For example, the administration leads by example by always saying both teachers’ names when referring to integrated classrooms. The integrated teachers are proud that their students often don’t know who the special education teacher is and who the general education teacher is in the classroom. Equally, students have difficulty identifying special education students from their general education peers.
For this restructuring to occur, Dr. Leve had to re-conceptualize the whole idea of special education programming in his building, and he spread and supported the belief that special education is defined as the delivery of services, but not a particular place or classroom.

By reconfiguring the delivery of services, Dr. Leve was able to operate his entire building in the spirit of the logic model for the delivery of specialized supports and services which “focuses on what students need rather than what they are in terms of a categorical service system” (Sailor, 2006, p. 127). No longer were the students with disabilities isolated according to their disability, but were now given the freedom to experience a general education experience while still receiving the support they needed to be successful regardless of their disability. In addition, with this new integration model of service delivery, the supports and modifications took place within the general education classroom, which is a way to benefit the maximum number of students, and the delivery of services was shifted from the classroom to the school, using all of the available resources to enrich the educational experience of all the students in the school (Sailor & Roger, 2005).

Reaping the Rewards and Facing the Challenges: Final Thoughts

There are data supported rewards from this commitment to inclusion at all grade levels, but barriers to a completely inclusive building also exist. The first cohort of students to experience inclusion was in fifth grade in 2008-09. On the New York State English Language Arts assessment, 90% of East Rochester students with disabilities achieved levels 3-4 compared to 46% of students with disabilities in similar schools. 86% of East Rochester students with disabilities scored levels 3-4 on the NYS mathematics assessment compared to 46% of students with disabilities from similar schools. On the fifth grade social studies assessment, 95% of East Rochester students with disabilities scored at levels 3-4. (No similar school data available on the NYS social studies assessment.) In addition, the NYSED 2008-09 School Report Card for the East Rochester School District also reported that 4.2% of students were in segregated settings, compared to 14.2% in 2003-04, which is a powerful statistic that illustrates this broken paradigm of a separate education for students with disabilities.

There are also more subtle rewards observed, such as a decrease in social isolation for students with disabilities who have now become full members of the general education classroom. In addition, the teachers have begun to embrace the collaborative culture of inclusion, which acknowledges the expertise of each member of the staff. This philosophy of inclusion was a gradual mindset that took hold slowly as the all of the stakeholders began to see the positive effects of inclusion for all of the children in the elementary building.

Although a future vision is a completely inclusive system of delivery of special education services, there remain three district-based self-contained classrooms in the elementary school building. However, these classrooms allow for a continuum of services for those students who are unable to be supported in the inclusive classrooms at this time but are able to remain in their home school. Non-traditional delivery models are used within these classrooms as well, such as reverse mainstreaming where students without disabilities are brought into the self-
contained classrooms to receive additional support not provided in the general education classroom and to provide role modeling for the students in the segregated settings.

Embracing change, whether or not it is the right thing to do, can be an insurmountable task for a traditional system that is used to doing things the way they have always been done. When change is approached and supported from the top down, this shift, no matter how large, is attainable if done one-step at a time and allows for true buy in from all involved parties. East Rochester Elementary School took hold of the vision of inclusion and is making it a reality one classroom at a time. The transition process is just that…a process. It takes time for people’s perceptions and perspectives to shift. Some people’s perceptions change faster and easier than others. We have made co-teaching one of our building initiatives and have provided the professional development to teachers to ensure their success and that of their students. Although the ultimate results remain to be seen, this paradigm shift has already produced measurable academic gains and a decrease in the number of students in segregated settings, but the most significant gain is in the feeling of community that permeates from every aspect of the school.

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References


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Extended Learning Opportunities

1. What are five things that Principal Leve did to support the transformation of the elementary school to an inclusive environment?

2. What are two collaborative relationships that Principal Leve engaged in and what were the goals of these relationships?

3. What was the re-conceptualization that Principal Leve and his faculty experienced?

4. Sapon-Shevin writes of “inclusion: a matter of social justice.” The authors of this article speak of the school’s “vision of social justice.” Speak to your understanding of the connection between inclusion and social justice.

5. What would have to happen in your school to move toward a more inclusive environment? Which of the activities initiated by Principal Leve would be a starting place or next steps, in a movement toward a more inclusive environment in your school?

Additional References:

