

FOCUS SECTION

INTRODUCTION

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In this focus section, *Catholic Education* turns its attention to student diversity and the issue of inclusive Catholic education. Inclusive Catholic education is defined as accepting all Catholic youngsters as learners and embracing them as valued members of the school's learning community. Inclusive Catholic education envisions a diverse student population reflective of the general Catholic population, such that the cognitively superior and the cognitively challenged are classmates.

This vision for Catholic schools is well within Catholic mission as Barton argues in her article. Articles by Catholic educators currently implementing inclusive Catholic education at elementary and secondary levels provide models of how Catholic schools can serve a more diverse student population than has been traditional practice. Other authors provide a way to think about how curriculum can be structured to meet the needs of a diverse population. Finally, we get down to brass tacks in a discussion of the legal possibilities and limitations for serving students with identified handicapping conditions.

The choice to serve students with diverse academic needs in Catholic schools is ultimately a school-by-school decision. When the decision is made to accept the challenge of inclusion, it needs to be made thoughtfully and within a framework of change. Villa and Thousand (1995) provide such a framework. They describe five factors (vision, skills, incentives, resources, and action plan) as the ingredients of change. All factors must be addressed. If a factor is omitted, the resulting mix is not change. For example, given skills, incentives, resources, and an action plan but no vision, the result is more likely confusion than change. Likewise, given a vision, incentives, resources, and an action plan but no skills, the result is most likely anxiety. Without incentives, resistance is the likely result; without resources, frustration rules; and without an action plan, you get the treadmill effect of going

nowhere. Catholic-school leaders need to address each of the five factors, especially if pursuing a movement toward inclusion.

Vision: a mental image created by the imagination (Webster, 1996, p. 756). Creating a vision that is not tangible presents a significant challenge because all members of the school community must “own” some part of the vision. Parents hold a vision for their own child’s future based on the education provided by the Catholic school. Teachers and administrators hold a vision of students as learners, often based on their own experiences as former students in the Catholic school. Students hold a vision of schooling and of their peers. The community, Catholic and otherwise, holds a vision of Catholic-school students. None of these visions is exactly alike. There is a common ground, a commonly held value. The task of the Catholic educational leader is to expand the many visions such that educating students with diverse learning needs becomes a part of the commonly held value.

Skill: proficiency or ability (Webster, 1996, p. 635). Training is the fabric of education; however, when it comes to students with special needs, that training has been selectively provided. Preservice teacher training programs have modeled a general education track and a special education track. Because of this modeling, there is a mystical sense about what a teacher needs to know to educate students with special learning needs and leads educators to assume a general feeling of being unprepared, possessing a total lack of knowledge, and having a need to go back to school and start over again. No one will deny that there are specific skills to learn; however, children are more alike than different. All teacher training programs provide an understanding of human development, learning theory, curriculum development, and teaching and learning strategies which are applicable to all students. The critical difference between general education and special education is the orientation to the individual. Special educators are oriented to the strengths and needs of the individual as they affect the acquisition of knowledge. Special educators think about moving through the curriculum at the individual’s rate of learning and in the way the individual can acquire and demonstrate knowledge. The pyramid learning model discussed in this focus section requires the educator to understand the learning diversity within a group and plan for that diversity. In the pyramid model not every student is expected to learn every concept. Each student is given the opportunity to learn all that is presented, but, just as there has always been a range of grades (e.g., As, Bs, Cs), some students will acquire more knowledge than others. The difference in the thinking is that the educator analyzes the content and prioritizes the learning, which results in various emphases being placed on instructional topics. This method of thinking serves to undergird the training and practice needed to accommodate a diverse student body. Educational leaders and teachers in

Catholic schools who create a new vision that includes students with special needs must plan on working differently. Professional development must be intense, ongoing, and multilevel.

Incentive: something inciting one to action or effort (Webster, 1996, p. 349). The reasons for teaching are as diverse as the individuals involved. What is the satisfaction gained from teaching? Why do we choose this profession? Some say they are called. Some like sharing their love for a subject. Some simply like children. The reasons for entering a profession, however, must stand the test of time if they are to sustain us through a career. For example, is “liking children” a motivator when “that” class arrives? You know, the one that was identified in first grade and challenges a new teacher each year. Is “liking children” enough to assure lifelong learning to keep abreast of new practices? Incentives are the motivators that provide us with the staying power continually to update our skills and meet the challenges of each new generation. Based on the new vision teachers who are able to be successful with students year after year and who delight in student learning, no matter how small the growth, are the ones to guide a program for students with learning needs. These teachers understand flexibility and individual learning. Their motivation comes in seeing the fruit of their labor in their students. Incentives for these teachers are mostly intrinsic; however, administrators need to give them support and recognition.

Resource: a source of support or aid (Webster, 1996, p. 583). Materials to accommodate poor readers or to support hands-on learning are important resources for teachers. Another resource that is typically sought when a program is created to meet the needs of students with learning needs is a special educator, teacher, or aide. The key to success in creating a new vision is that all educators, general and special, feel responsible for the success of the new program. The special education teacher or aide must be a member of the learning team, not merely the teacher of the students with special needs.

Action Plan: action—the process of doing (Webster, 1996, p. 9); plan—a method for achieving something (Webster, 1996, p. 522). Giving life to the vision of meeting the needs of a more diverse student population requires action. As Barker (1993) states, “Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. Vision with action can change the world.” Actions include identifying skills and resources needed for realizing the vision, setting priorities, designing a timeline, and agreeing on who has which responsibilities.

The articles in this issue of *Catholic Education* are meant to provide the reader with the building blocks for creating more inclusive Catholic educa-

tional environments. Several book reviews conclude the focus section. The reviewers provide a practitioner's perspective and draw our attention to some new texts that will prove helpful to all educators.

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