



Equity Dispatch

Creating Inclusive Learning Communities
Through Professional Learning



IMPACT: *Educate, Engage, Empower--For Equity*

"I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or de-humanized."

-Dr. Haim Ginott

Educate

Building Inclusive Learning Communities

In inclusive schools, teachers set contexts for students to explore the world and develop their talents. Culturally responsive classroom materials and inquiry-based learning experiences offer opportunities for active learning, and students are provided multiple venues for demonstrating what they know. All students and staff are given the time and resources they need to engage in inquiry and develop new skills. Each person feels valued and respected.

Summer 2012



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Equity Spotlight

Seem idealistic? In an educational landscape dominated by academic standards, one-size-fits-all curricula, and high-stakes testing, many educators may feel pessimistic about whether this vision could ever be achieved. In fact, moving toward a more inclusive learning community may feel like swimming against the tide. Yet, with strong leaders and passionate, committed educators willing to take on the work of professional learning, including critical analysis of their own beliefs and practices that may lead to student exclusion and marginalization, schools can be transformed.

Professional learning is not professional development in the traditional sense, where educators seat themselves in a room, spend hours listening to the speaker of the day describe a particular method, resource, or strategy, and return to their classrooms with a collection of handouts. While easy to offer, these kinds of learning opportunities are generally too fragmented and irrelevant to transform daily practices (Lieberman & Mace, 2008).

Professional learning, on the other hand, requires collaborative inquiry and discussion that is grounded in the local context and part of the daily practice of teaching (King, Artiles, & Kozleski, 2009). As such, learning is conceptualized and carried out as a communal activity with cycles of inquiry, including data collection and analysis, that lead to changes in practice (Kozleski & Waitoller, 2010). Within schools engaged in professional learning, one is likely to find the allocation of resources, such as time, space, and work structures (e.g. study groups or vertical teams) for such inquiry and reflection and a general culture of continuous learning and willingness to adapt to the changing context.

While inquiry, discussion, and connection to the local context make professional learning more reflective of the research on effective teacher development (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009), these practices and conditions will not - in and of themselves - lead to more inclusive learning environments. Rather, professional learning that serves this purpose also requires specific types of inquiry into teaching and learning; these include reflection on teacher identities, inquiry into students' backgrounds and communities, examination of patterns of discrimination or oppression both broadly and in the local context, and embedding continual reflection and analysis into everyday professional practice.

First and foremost, teachers must be prompted to reflect on their identities and cultural backgrounds, understanding that their own beliefs about teaching and learning shape the learning environments they create for their students (Kozleski & Waitoller, 2010). This type of reflection forms the basis from which teachers can create "authentic relationships with students, deliberately plan responsive instruction, and actively implement multiple ways of constructing knowledge" (Maye & Day, 2012, p. 20).

Educators also must take time to learn about their students and the cultures and communities they inhabit, thereby better understanding the strengths and values students bring to the classroom. Analyzing and developing a grounded understanding and respect for the social norms and values associated with students' home cultures may prevent cultural disconnect and lead to more inclusive learning environments through the dissolution of stereotypes and the creation of culturally responsive pedagogy (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

Professional learning contributes to inclusive education by requiring critical reflection on educational benefits, asking collectively which groups of students have access to, participate in, and succeed as a result of the opportunities they receive in school. Facilitating such discussions will require trust and the ability to walk a fine line between respecting individuals and critically analyzing their teaching (Borko, 2004). Coaching can be a valuable tool for prompting and sustaining these difficult, but courageous conversations (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

Continued examination of teacher identities, student backgrounds, and institutional norms and policies can



Dr. Ann Laing is currently serving as the superintendent of the Racine Unified School District (RUSD). Prior to her position as superintendent, Dr. Laing held the role of RUSD Director of Special Education for four years. As an administrator for RUSD, she has implemented a variety of initiatives that have improved instruction and student achievement. Perhaps one of the most influential was her work to ensure students with disabilities are taught within general education classrooms. This work allows all students within RUSD to get the instruction and support they need in order to be successful learners.

In addition to her work in implementing inclusive practices at Racine Unified School District, Dr. Laing has written numerous proposals to improve the educational opportunities for students within the district centered on transforming assessment processes, the creation of the District's four-year-old kindergarten (4K) program, including special education services in the 4K programs, and bringing the early childhood learning program under the direct administration of one supervising principal.

Dr. Laing has served as a regular education teacher as well as a special education teacher. Dr. Laing has also taught for Northwest Missouri State University and directed the lab school. She received a

and will be achieved by embedding continual reflection and analysis into everyday professional practice. Discussing student outcomes and reflecting on teaching practices will no longer be cumbersome, but instead will become the norm. (King & Kozleski, 2009). The knowledge gained as a result of such discussions can and will be shared as learning from one another becomes part of the school climate, allowing successful practices to be replicated and refined (King & Kozleski, 2009). As with any other educational initiative, the true aspiration is to continually improve and engage other professionals in similar successful practices.

Engage

"They (Racine Unified School District) have been successful in this practice. It is not perfect, but they have made great strides." --Dr. Ann Laing

Racine Unified School District located in Racine, Wisconsin has realized the importance of professional learning as a tool for creating inclusive learning environments in order to meet the educational needs of the diverse body of learners within their district. After receiving a report highlighting problems in the districts approach to special education from the Department of Exceptional Education at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, Dr. Ann Laing, former director of special education and current superintendent of Racine Unified School District, realized the district would need to undergo a transformation.

She created one large work group, which was divided into five smaller work groups. Administrators, teachers, and advocates from organizations such as The Arc Racine of Wisconsin and Disability Rights Wisconsin worked in a collaborative fashion to visit other school districts, analyze special education laws, study the term "least restrictive environment," and read current research on creating inclusive learning environments for students with disabilities. As a result of their research, the work group created an inclusive education model based on providing each student with equal access to the same curriculum in their least restrictive environment, and in 2009, the school district began the process of transforming some of their pre-kindergarten using their newly developed model.

At the pre-kindergarten level, classrooms implementing this model contain two teachers - one general education teacher and one special education teacher - engaged in a co-teaching relationship, as well as two instructional aides - one half-time general education aid and one full time special education aid. At the elementary level, approximately 1/3 of the classroom is made up of students with disabilities. At the middle school level, teachers are arranged into teams that serve one hundred and twenty students. These teams are composed of teachers from each of the core subjects (reading, math, science, social studies) as well as a special education teacher. These teams of teachers work as a collaborative unit to maximize the instructional outcomes of their students. The presence of the special education teacher at the elementary and middle school level is to provide continual support based on the needs of the individual students within the classroom as stated in their individualized education plans.

Professional learning opportunities have been critical to the success of Racine Unified's work. The district's professional learning began when representatives from Racine Unified attended the Leadership for Inclusive Practices Workshop facilitated by the Inclusion Institute at Syracuse University on two different occasions. Professional learning activities have since evolved in this district and are focused on three key components: inclusion, differentiated instruction, and co-teaching. To facilitate professional learning, the district has recruited and maintains four inclusion facilitators/coaches. The inclusion coaches have been instrumental in the continual development and improvement of inclusive classrooms within the district by providing ongoing professional learning opportunities for teachers.

Although these inclusive practices have not been implemented in all classrooms within the district, eighteen of the district's elementary schools and four of the districts middle schools have been successful in serving students with disabilities in the general education classroom. All pre-kindergarten, elementary, and middle schools in Racine Unified are working towards including students with disabilities in the general education classroom, and this process is soon to take place at the high school level as the work groups will be reconvening to develop an inclusive education model for the high school level. According to Dr. Laing, ".....it is a continuous improvement effort." Including students with disabilities in the general education classroom is a key strategy in creating inclusive learning environments.

The Great Lakes Equity Center would like to extend a special thank you to Dr. Ann Laing and Ms. Jamie

Bachelor of Science degree in elementary education, Master of Arts degree in elementary education and Doctor of Education degree in reading and special education from Ball State University.

Upcoming Events

Indiana

July 18, 2012 *Indiana Black Expo Statewide Education Conference* Indianapolis Black Expo, INC.
[Click here for more information](#)

Minnesota

July 9-10, 2012 2012 Colloquium on P-12 STEM Education University of Minnesota, College of Education
[Click here for more information](#)

Illinois

September 26-27, 2012 School Response Conference Northern Illinois University
[Naperville, IL](#)

Wisconsin

July 23-25, 2012 19th Annual State-Wide Institute on Best Practices in Inclusive Education Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and the Inclusion Institute, Inc.
Westwood Conference Center Wausau, WI

July 30-August 3, 2012 Leadership for Social Justice Institute School of Education on Bascom Hill University of Wisconsin-Madison

[Click here for more information](#)

Syvruud for sharing the information used to create this article.

Empower

Something to Watch!



In this video, Prime Minister of Education, Hon. Thomas A. Lukaszuk showcases the ways in which educators in the Alberta, Canada school system are meeting the diverse needs of all learners within their province. Check out how this district has used technology to facilitate instruction and has created a school climate that celebrates diversity. As evidenced by both student and parent testimonials, this province truly reflects what inclusive learning environments should look like in professional practice.

Something to Read!



Do you want to serve as an agent of change in your school setting? Now more than ever, it remains crucial for principals to take charge in creating facilitative partnerships with teachers and other education professionals to actively engage in creating inclusive learning environments for all learners within the general education setting. Salisbury and McGregor discuss the six characteristics of an effective leader, the essential elements of understanding how change occurs effectively, and provide two enlightening models of change to help transform your school into an inclusive learning environment. Whether you adhere to the "essential variables model" or the "asking the right questions model" outlined in the article, transitioning to inclusive classrooms can be achieved through collaborative partnerships amongst teachers, principals, and other educational professionals. Although this article has a centralized focus on transforming urban school settings, information derived from this article holds practicality for principals to

In the News

["York Students Have Late Arrival Days Nearly Every Wednesday During the 2012-13 School Year"](#)

School implements teacher collaboration time



["Science Instructor Named L-W North Teacher of The Year"](#)

Sceince teacher awarded for her innovative insruction and collaboration with other teachers



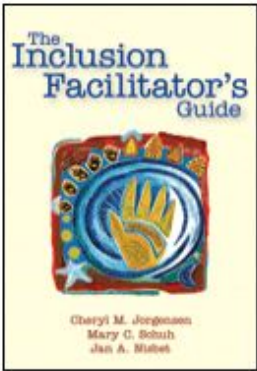
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"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world, indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

serve as a "catalyst of change" (Salisbury & McGregor, 2009) within all school settings. Find this publication in [The Great Lakes Equity Center's Library](#).

Something to Use!

Do you want to apply the principles of creating inclusive learning environments to your instructional practices? *The Inclusion Facilitator's Guide*, authored by Dr. Cheryl Jorgensen, Dr. Mary Schuh, and Dr. Jan Nisbet, offers great insights into how to utilize and implement the 10 key elements of inclusion in your professional practice. Whether you are interested in fostering positive student interactions, guiding the trend to inclusive practices in your school building, transforming your approach to assessment, re-evaluating your role as an educator, or you are just looking for resources to foster the transition to inclusion in your classroom, this book holds valuable information for you! Written by individuals employed at the Institute on Disability and the successful Inclusion Facilitator Training Option at the University of New Hampshire, this book is a must read!



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Disclaimer

Great Lakes Equity Center is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education.

-Margaret Meade

Which of the following practices would you like to see your school implement as a part of professional learning?

- Ability to work in cross curricular and/or multi-grade work teams
- Offer opportunities for educators to reflect on their cultural identities as well as their students' cultural identities
- Offer opportunities for educators to engage with the community they serve
- Increase time for collaboration among professionals
- Ability to engage in co-teaching partnerships
- Other (Please Share)

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