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Improving Education for All Students Along the Continuum of Learning: Stronger Collaborations Provide an Opportunity

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Ryan (all names are pseudonyms) entered my second-grade classroom without knowing his alphabet, let alone being able to read at the same level as his classmates. He left my class at the end of the year reading at a beginning second-grade level. He had advanced over two years in his reading ability — and the current system of accountability labeled him as a failure!

Matt is taking English I again because he did not pass the English I test. Matt started the semester on a second-grade reading level and ended up on a fifth-grade reading level. But according to the English test, he is still not up to grade level, even though he made huge progress during that semester. He should be graded according to his growth and improvement.

Ryan, a student in Ms. Cox's class, and Matt, a student in Ms. Newsome's class are not alone — there are many children who are moving forward but have not reached that arbitrary, magical level of readiness deemed “normal” for their age. There are also many others who have the ability

to move beyond this prescribed readiness level but are not given the chance because they have met the required goal and provide no incentive to the school for advancement. With the current accountability system, the school gains nothing by moving children beyond the predetermined basic levels typically based upon state standards.

In *The Audacity of Hope*, President Obama outlined his beliefs concerning the education of America's children. Those beliefs included a need for an economic consensus that would provide an investment in education, a joint responsibility between the school and the children's parents, and a belief that providing money for programs and “the way public schools are managed” (p. 191) by government matters. The argument was made that “America's schools are not holding up their end of the bargain” (p. 189), that if you work hard, you will have a chance for a better life. President Obama noted many of the problems plaguing our schools — the common occurrence of low-quality inner city schools, high dropout rates, low math and science scores, a lack of preparation for college-level classes — and decried the American

“tolerance for mediocrity” (p. 190). How are these beliefs going to be translated into practices that will benefit the Ryans and Matts of this world as well as their high-ability classmates? As we struggle to change the perceived as well as real problems in our schools, what changes need to be made and where?

School administrations as well as legislators, the parties holding the purse strings and the power over schools, often declare that they are doing all that is right and good for students. School mission statements almost universally declare, in one form or another, that the school provides a caring, nurturing, and stimulating environment that enables *all* students to reach their full potential. For their part, federal, state, and local legislators implement policies that they believe will hold all public schools accountable toward achieving the same goal. Most recently, in *A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (heretofore referred to as the *Blueprint* (2010), President Obama asserts many countries are out-educating us. He states that we must “raise the expectations for our students, for our schools, and for ourselves.” He proposes that we do so by making sure that all students are college and career-ready when they graduate from high school. In his introduction to the *Blueprint* (2010), President Obama maintains, “We must foster school environments where teachers have the time to collaborate, the opportunities to lead, and the respect that all professionals deserve.” However, with current trends in educational policy, we question how committed policymakers are to making these defensible goals truly intended to result in benefits for all students.

The voices offered in this chapter are of those who live daily with the ramifications created by current legislation. These voices of teachers, administrators, and teacher educators illustrate the difficult indifference experienced daily by students and teachers. The voices also share possible solutions, most importantly, being given the time and resources to collaborate in order to meet the accountability goals while also meeting the needs of all

students in the inclusive general-education classroom. These teachers and administrators emphasize that general-education teachers skilled in grade-level curriculum and standards need the opportunity to collaborate with other educators who are skilled to meet the distinctive needs of students at both ends of the spectrum in order to meet all of their students’ needs.

Needs of Special Education and High-Ability Students

It is our belief that current accountability measures have created an atmosphere that does not allow for resources to be used to enable students with special needs, *struggling or high-ability*, to have their unique needs addressed or met. The very legislation that has been created to protect our most valuable resources, our children, has created a system that results in teachers not being allowed to do the very job for which they are trained — to truly meet the needs of all students in their classes. Special-education and high-ability students are subjected to a curriculum and standards that, by their very nature, were not intended to meet the needs of struggling or gifted students.

For example, it is noted in the Indiana third-grade mathematics standards, under Number Sense, that third-grade students should be able to “count, read, and write whole numbers up to 1,000” (Standards, 2000, p. 25). They also learn to order and round numbers up to 1,000, develop the concept of equivalent fractions, and begin to develop the concept of decimals. Curriculum and assessments are then written to ensure that students in the inclusive third-grade classroom can perform these functions.

However, look into the classroom and consider the children who are having difficulty understanding place value: ones, tens, thousands, let alone decimal places. The standards declare they should be competent in these concepts; all the work they encounter in their classroom expresses these concepts in one fashion or another; their classmates seem to understand. They are labeled “failures” because they cannot understand. These struggling students are the ones who need to have the information presented in a different format or at a different conceptual

level to understand. They may need to see and manipulate the concepts of place value before they can be assessed on its merits. Students with special learning differences may need to be exposed to the concepts multiple times before it really becomes a known fact for them. On the opposite end of the spectrum is the child who has understood numbers since he was 4 years old. He can add, subtract, multiply, and divide numbers with much larger values, but he also experiences the same work as the child who is struggling. That is the prescribed curriculum; that is, the curriculum that will be represented on the *test*. Priority lies in preparing students for the test. The curriculum does not allow for flexibility for individual students, the student who needs it taught again and in a different format and the student who knew it before coming to school. In most schools, teachers are required to demonstrate that they are teaching to the test and standards. The focus seems to be the preset score on the test, and making that score is the only thing that matters. How individual students get there is not important. Teachers are not given the flexibility to teach students about certain content; they have to teach content in the prescribed format.

To what do we refer when we speak of the unique needs of struggling and high-ability students? Struggling students is a term used to identify a vastly diverse group of students who have needs that are as unique as they are. They need teachers who understand their individual uniqueness and teachers who know how to address these unique needs. We may speak of children who struggle academically, but the label tells us nothing of the child. Why is the child struggling, what is causing him to stumble and fall? The trained teacher looks for the answers and hopes to be allowed to help him. Unfortunately, time and resources are not available to differentiate for this student. We must follow one path; we must provide “equal” (translated into “same”) opportunities for all students. And the child who could count to 1,000 when he was 4 years old? At 9, he is only required to count to 1,000 to meet the standard, the accountability measure. There is no advantage to moving him forward — he has met our requirement.

In *The Audacity of Hope* (Obama, 2008), it was declared that “too many of our schools depend on inexperienced teachers with little training in the subjects they’re teaching” (p. 191). There is so much emphasis today on teachers having “content knowledge” that we forget that the “how” of teaching is every bit as important a “subject” as the “what.” Many people are quite knowledgeable in their field, whether it be technology, medicine, auto mechanics, etc., but they would not have the content knowledge of the individual needs of the diverse body we call a classroom of students. President Obama argued that “by the end of two years, most [young people interested in teaching, predominantly referring to Teach for America trained educators] have either changed careers or moved to suburban schools — a consequence of low pay, a lack of support from the educational bureaucracy, and a pervasive feeling of isolation” (Obama, 2008, p. 192). We offer the counter-argument that they leave the field at the end of their contract because they have found that the content knowledge gained in their training prior to education was insufficient to understand the larger picture of teaching. They often have adequate knowledge of content but lack the knowledge of teaching.

High-ability students often have their own unique needs generated by a set of common characteristics. These include having a large bank of information on which to draw as well as quick mastery and recall of this and new information. In addition, they frequently grasp underlying principles of new concepts and try to understand material that is generally at a higher level of complexity than their age peers. These characteristics again lead to a need for teachers who understand their needs and are willing and able to provide learning experiences that are presented at a faster pace and more complex level than for the average learner. As a second-grade teacher put it, “I think the high-ability kids are more challenging than the lower ability. It is easier to see, if they don’t get it we have to re-teach it. It is real easy to overlook the kids who got it; I am pushing them to the side.”

As with many students who exhibit strong creative and critical thinking abilities, high-ability students need activities that are not often presented in today's test-driven environment to develop these abilities. Unfortunately, in our current "drill and kill" test preparation, there is little need or opportunity to provide adequately paced and complex instruction. It is interesting to note that President Obama stated, "If we want an innovation economy, one that generates more Googles each year, then we have to invest in our future innovators" (Obama, 2008, p. 197). How do we "invest in our future" when teaching to meet minimum standards sets the bar?

For a variety of reasons, not all schools have formal systems or procedures for identifying and challenging high-ability students. This often results in a lack of accommodations being provided for these students. In other situations, as noted by the principal from a small rural school in Indiana, "We just formally started an identification process with our high-ability students. ... Teachers are working on formal lesson plans for high-ability students. *However, not every teacher gets to participate in that process, so collaboration time would be ideal to discuss those lessons and then the students will benefit* [italics added]." Fortunately, teachers and principals often agree an appropriate process is not in place to identify and accommodate for high-ability students. As with any unique group of students, district-wide resources and support are considered necessary to meet the needs of high-ability students.

Before you begin to think in terms of students being labeled as struggling, average, or high-ability, let us remember that students do not fit into any one neatly labeled and predesigned area but can fall anywhere along a wide continuum of learning. In addition, students most often succeed at varying levels along the continuum in different content areas. One who struggles in mathematics may be quite talented when working in the language arts. To complicate things further, students are often twice exceptional; they may have a learning disability while at the same time be among the most highly able. Their

achievement test scores often do not give a true indication of their abilities when their disability interferes with their performance. In addition, this leads to tendency to identify them by their deficiencies, as reinforced by their test scores, while ignoring their strengths.

Proposed Funding to Meet the Needs of Diverse Learners

The *Blueprint* (2010) acknowledges the need for funding programs for diverse students. It is further noted that funding for programs focusing on students with disabilities has historically come through the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. President Obama has proposed that the nation increase this support to "help ensure that teachers and leaders are better prepared to meet the needs of diverse learners, that assessments more accurately and appropriately measure the performance of students with disabilities, and that more districts and schools implement high-quality, state- and locally-determined curricula and instructional supports that incorporate the principles of universal design for learning to meet all students' needs" (p. 20). Yet the proposed funding for IDEA state grants in 2011, \$225 million, is well below the promised 40 percent of federal funding (LDAAmerica, 2010). Where is it?

Students with disabilities are included in this proposal, along with English language learners and homeless children. However, there is very little acknowledgment of students who are high-ability learners (gifted and talented). In fact, the one very minor mention of gifted students represents no more than an afterthought. The facts are that the funding for the *Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act*, the only funding provided for high-ability students, is proposed to be cut to \$0 (NAGC, 2010). The purpose of this subpart of the *No Child Left Behind* legislation is to provide resources to supply programming that meets the special educational needs of gifted and talented students across the nation (Jacob K. Javits, 2010). Without any acknowledgment of the diverse needs of high-ability students, whether direct or

indirect (through funding), teachers are forced to provide as best they can without training or resources. Although President Obama declared, “Our task, then, is to identify those reforms that have the highest impact on student achievement, fund them adequately, and eliminate those programs that don’t produce results” (Obama, 2008, p. 191), when he developed his new agenda outlined in the *Blueprint* (2010), the programs will not be adequately funded and the approaches suggested, particularly for high-ability students, are vaguely outlined at best.

Success or Failure

Our opening examples of Ryan and Matt illustrate the difficulties encountered when labeling a child a success or failure, particularly based upon one test score, a snapshot of their entire year’s effort. One area of the *Blueprint* (2010) that does give us cause for hope is the proposed changes to the assessment process. Recognition has been made that “most school districts rely solely on test scores to measure teacher performance, and that test scores may be highly dependent on factors beyond any teacher’s control, like the number of low-income or special-needs students in their classroom,” and more “meaningful, performance-based assessments” (Obama, 2008, p. 193) are needed to accurately evaluate student and teacher performance.

The administration asserts, “State accountability systems will be asked to recognize progress and growth and reward success, rather than only identify failure” (*Blueprint*, 2010, p. 9). We support this ideal of growth! One alternative to the one snapshot is to measure each student’s individual progression through the year or semester. Students should be given routine pre- and post-assessments throughout the academic period, and the proficiency score should then be based on their improvement over the semester, and not how well they scored on one single test. The stories of Ryan and Matt illustrate why we must assess students on their individual growth and progress instead of measuring every student by one standard or goal. Students with disabilities may never pass the test at their grade level because of

their learning differences. However, they do grow and progress. The *Blueprint* (2010) supports this individual measurement. “Improved assessments can be used to accurately measure student growth; to better measure how states, districts, schools, principals, and teachers are educating students; to help teachers adjust and focus their teaching; and to provide better information to students and their families” (p. 11). We feel with this measurement of growth, all students along the continuum of learning will be called a “success” and hopefully challenged at their own developmental level.

Bridging the Gap

Collaboration provides a vital component that effective schools can use to meet the needs of all students. In the *Blueprint* (2010), the administration contends that collaboration and professional development opportunities are keys to effective teachers, leaders, and schools. President Obama asserted, “We have to do more to ensure that every student has an effective teacher, every school has effective leaders, and every teacher and leader has access to the preparation, ongoing support, recognition, and collaboration opportunities he or she need to succeed” (*Blueprint*, 2010, p. 13). We wholeheartedly concur with his sentiments.

When asked, teachers had many ideas of how collaboration has benefited both them and their students. In the following stories, the teachers share their perceptions of the benefits of collaboration as a whole.

I think it is better for everybody. It makes me a better teacher because I want to bring new ideas to the group. ...I think it is better for my kids. They benefit not only from the experience from their one teacher, but also from the experiences of the two other teachers, and lots of times they benefit from another classroom trying it and it being successful or not successful and that teacher sharing. Well I think overall, when the kids are benefiting then everybody benefits. That’s the whole idea. I think when the kids benefit, then the

family benefits, and then the whole community benefits. (Cindy, veteran kindergarten teacher)

I think from my standpoint moving from another grade level, this has been a “God send.” Because otherwise I would have felt like I was flopping around out there like a fish out of water. And nobody had a lifeline. I really do think when we get a chance to share ideas or a little trick to share that is great. ...You can’t be up on all of these things, it is impossible and you would make yourself crazy trying to. So this is great, we can take an idea and tweak it for ourselves. I think it benefits our kids. We all teach a little bit differently, but we all bring that to the table. ...So we can all benefit our kids, which is why we teach. (Amy, a veteran first-grade teacher at a new grade level).

These two teachers share how collaboration makes them a better teacher and is a “God send” for them to perform their duties effectively. Teachers cannot be expected to know all the content and strategies to meet the complex needs of all students. Collaboration allows them to combine their knowledge and experiences. The following stories illustrate how collaboration was beneficial for the students in the classroom.

My favorite teacher to collaborate with is a ninth-grade English teacher. Before we coteach the class, we get together to talk about what we feel are our areas of strength and weakness, then we teach the parts of the class that involve more of our strength areas. An example is that I teach the vocabulary lessons and she teaches the grammar lessons. She will also teach more of the mythology and Shakespeare literature in the course, while I will teach the sections on fiction and nonfiction. I believe that all students benefit by having different strategies and teaching methods demonstrated in the classroom. The students who benefit the most are the students with disabilities and struggling students not identified as Exceptional Children.

These students get more individualized help in the classroom. They get the benefit that if they do not learn the material the way one teacher teaches it, they have another teacher with ideas to help them grasp the material and succeed in the class. I have seen many successes where students succeed in a classroom with two teachers collaborating and sharing different strategies to help students with different learning styles succeed. (Rebecca, high school special education resource specialist)

The kids understand their stomachs. Even though they are in the sixth grade, some students still struggle with fractions. I was having trouble coming up with a way to reach them. Our resource teacher [the special education resource teacher] and I talked about it and came up with the idea of using McDonald’s third pounders and quarter pounders. The kids couldn’t figure out why a third pounder would cost more than a quarter pounder — 3 is less than 4. As the resource teacher told the story, I drew visuals on the Smartboard that compared the sizes of $\frac{1}{3}$ and $\frac{1}{4}$ and hamburger sizes. The kids got it. (Amber, sixth-grade mathematics teacher in an elementary school).

These stories exemplify the ideal of collaboration between professionals using their strengths of content knowledge with the appropriate knowledge of multiple teaching strategies to meet the needs of all students in the inclusive classroom. Collaboration allows these teachers to use the required state standards and their strengths to coteach students for the maximum effective production of knowledge and mastery from the students. This connects with the *Blueprint* (2010) statements on progress of growth; we support that avenue of testing and applaud the concept of individual growth, not a fixed number on an arbitrary test. These situations share that the teachers were more concerned about how the students “got it” and their individual growth, than about what the state standard said had to be covered. If teachers are given the

opportunities and flexibility to collaborate with other professionals, just imagine the possibilities. The students would learn content and pass the tests and still enjoy the process of learning at their individual levels of growth. Isn't that what school should be, a place to love to learn, not just a series of tests to pass?

Professional Development

Collaboration is a developed skill that requires professional instruction to be effective. As noted by the *Blueprint* (2010),

School districts may use funds to develop and implement fair and meaningful teacher and principal evaluation systems, working in collaboration with teachers, principals, and other stakeholders; to foster and provide collaboration and development opportunities in schools and build instructional teams of teachers, leaders, and other school staff, including paraprofessionals; to support educators in improving their instructional practice through effective, ongoing, job-embedded, professional development that is targeted to student and school needs; and to carry out other activities to improve the effectiveness of teachers, principals, and other school staff, and ensure the equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals. (p. 15)

There are multiple models of improvement and professional development for teachers, administrators, and schools. One school in rural Indiana chose the learning communities' model described in *Whatever It Takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don't Learn* (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). The principal in this school sees the value of support for collaboration and professional development to meet the needs of her entire staff. As she explains it,

Well, I think collaboration is like what the Dufors say about the "collective intelligence." Nobody has all the answers, but all of us can come up with some good answers. They are even

better the more people that are participating and the more minds that you have working. I think collaboration is really important. Sometimes people don't know what they know until they say it to someone else. They see the surprise or smile on someone's face, and then they think, "I have always known that." Or they think, "I've know that for 10 years and it never occurred to me that it was ingenuous in some way." I think that is a wonderful by-product of collaboration. Then it leads to student improvement.

Several school districts in Indiana have utilized an early release day or late arrival day once per week to offer collaboration training and time. These routinely scheduled days and times allow for general education and special education teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, and other school personnel to meet and discuss how to more effectively carry out their responsibilities toward educating America's children. Teachers and administrators have expressed that these collaboration times have proven very beneficial for advancing the practices and strategies of teachers to meet the needs of all students. Just as medical doctors share patient information for more effective treatment of the patient, teachers need to share vital information about students in order to best meet the many complexities of student learning. To effectively teach, you need knowledge of the whole child, knowledge of content and strategies, as well as knowledge of how students interact in their environment.

Suggestions for Preparing Teachers

We feel to be effective teachers for all students along the continuum of learning, teacher preparation programs need to include instruction for the differentiation of learning activities, appropriate teaching strategies, content knowledge, and skills for collaborating with other professionals. Teachers need to be exposed to the multiple ways to teach students who learn at all levels of development and with diverse learning styles and abilities. Without this knowledge and skills in how to differentiate

instruction, today's teachers are often at a deficit in how to meet the needs of their diverse student population. Once again, collaboration provides one useful tool for teachers to gain these needed skills.

The *Blueprint* (2010) establishes the importance of content knowledge for teachers, and we support content knowledge as a key component of teaching. However, as most teachers will have students all along the continuum of learning, they need to have knowledge of the subjects that they teach but must also understand appropriate teaching methods to effectively relay subject matter to all students. A symbiotic relationship is needed between the content knowledge and the methods with which to teach the content to all students. It does no good for the teacher to know how to complete algebraic equations if they do not know how to teach the completion of equations to their diverse students. Content knowledge does not guarantee an automatic transference of knowledge to the students.

Collaboration skills are vital to working with others for the common goal of meeting students' needs. At our regional university campus in Indiana, a required course for all special education teacher candidates is a course on collaboration and service delivery models. This course addresses the many complexities of working with others who are educated and devoted to their profession. We stress that you have to know your own strengths and weaknesses before you can effectively work with others. Throughout the course, we practice skills of mediation and discussion for the "win-win" scenario. Adults in the school

environment need to work collaboratively to develop the skills of negotiation to be successful in meeting all needs. We believe that the collaboration course would be a value for all teacher education candidates, not just the students in special education.

Conclusion

Longer than four decades ago, the first special education law, P.L. 94-142 (US Department of Education, 2007), mandated that schools must provide a continuum of educational services for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP), which allow students to be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). We decree that this continuum of educational services and the LRE should be a right of all students. As a nation, why would we want to push our children into a "one size fits all" educational system and restrict our students from achieving to their fullest potential? If we do not change the methods in which our children are taught and the assessments with which we measure our children, we will force all of our children to learn in the *most restrictive environment*. In America, we value uniqueness and challenge our children to stand up for our values of democracy; yet we push our children to be automatons when we consider the public school systems. We must learn how to appreciate each child as a unique individual who has something beneficial to contribute to our society and respond accordingly. As educators of children, we have to be the voices that speak for our future: our children.

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