Effective Inclusion Program Suggestions From Around the World

by David Aloyzy Zera

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"Reflection, inquiry, and action are interrelated in teacher research because teachers act as thinkers, learners, and practitioners throughout their studies" (Patterson & Shannon, 1993, p. 10). Some facets of action inquiry may be more intensely implemented than others (e.g., reflection over inquiry, inquiry over action, etc.), but the fact remains that at some point in the process, all facets are explored in some fashion. The purposes of these facets are to foster dialogue and open avenues of thought that may effect positive change in naturalistic settings. Rather than being *outside the system*, it is important for professionals who interact *within the system* to dialogue effectively and share their insights, data, and newfound information. There is a reciprocal relationship in that research guides practice, teachers implement the practice, and further research examines its efficacy. Without the dialogue, systems may not change, and advances in knowledge cannot take place.

As a member of an international organization (IASE: The International Association of Special Education) for special education professionals and affiliated personnel, I have begun to dialogue with researchers, teachers, university professors, child advocates, and others from around the world. Members gather every other year at a professional conference to share their research findings, develop collegial relationships, and engage in effective dialogue regarding various relevant issues pertaining to special education. IASE has members from more than 35 countries around the world and conferences have been held in Australia, Austria, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This past summer, the conference was held in Warsaw, Poland, and I was selected to be Editor of the conference proceedings, entitled, "Making A World of Difference." In this role, I received manuscripts from around the world and was provided with the unique opportunity to examine a variety of theories and practices and reflect upon their application in various countries.

Examining these manuscripts provided me with a unique insight into the various, and yet, similar issues affecting action research in international educational settings. It is apparent that the United States is not alone in its implementation of inclusion-based classroom practices, and that there are common concerns that affect all of us. While there is little "hard" research available that accurately evaluates the successes of inclusion-based practices, it seems that our philosophical stances guide our action research endeavors and thus influence our teaching. This research allowed me to critically examine perspectives from an "outside world view" and discover similarities and differences. In this article I conduct a meta-analysis of nine action research projects related specifically to special education, gleaning key themes and findings. The value of this meta-analysis lies in synthesizing experiences and issues from a variety of international, largely non-Western settings.

Primary Issue

One of the primary issues noted by a number of authors was the mainstreaming of children with special learning and behavior needs into general education classes (inclusion-based practices). Integrating children with disabilities with typically developing peers is becoming the norm in parts of Africa, Canada, China, Croatia, Cyprus, India, Poland, and the United States to name a few (Zera & Bleszynska, 2001). Some countries, such as the United States, have implemented such programming with great zeal, occasionally it seems, in opposition to the tenets of the law that require a continuum of services that range from the least restrictive (full inclusion) to the most restrictive (residential treatment facility or hospitalization). In fact, some researchers (Zera & Seitsinger, 2000) have hypothesized that some school systems may actually be oppressing persons with disabilities by not providing them with a full-continuum of services as they implement full-inclusion models of service delivery. Mackelprang and Salsgiver (1999) use alternative language to describe disability and interpret it as "being a condition of diversity and of oppression rather than a psychological or physical dysfunction" (p. xv). It becomes important, therefore, to examine how successful inclusion-based practices are implemented, and what are the common themes that teachers and researchers feel are important in the creation of such programs so that the needs of individuals are met. Recognizing the multiple ways that various societies view disabling conditions may help to foster a common understanding and promote change in societies' interpretations (Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 1999).

Emerging Themes

A number of common issues regarding inclusion-based practices were noted in the articles that were selected for publication in the conference proceedings, and a few themes emerged. The development of effective, collegial dialogue was consistently mentioned. Additionally, expanding the knowledge base of teachers regarding multicultural issues and the need to critically investigate factors related to successful inclusion practices emerged as themes.

Understanding Cultural Differences

Professionals in Canada, China, India, Poland, South Africa, and the United States suggest that the acceptance and understanding of cultural differences are key for successful inclusion (Zera & Bleszynska, 2001). One recommendation from a university professor in Poland was to take "into account the way of life that is typical for the given community and the community's attitudes towards persons with disabilities" (Bleszynska, 2001, p. 23). She believes that disabilities are interpreted differently by the cultural milieu and are relativized by the community and its values. For example, a learning disability or mental retardation label may be especially stigmatizing in communities that value high academic performance (Bleszynska, 2001) yet might be less debilitating in communities that are more concerned with non-academic issues.

Additionally, A. Chadha, (2001) who was appointed as a National Consultant by the Ministry of Education for India's primary education program states that "rural children need strategies quite different from those in the urban areas" (p. 29), and "teachers are the agents of change" (p. 30). She believes that progress is fostered by teachers' attitudes of attentiveness, expectations and encouragement (Chadha, 2001). Thus, it becomes important for one to not only examine the

values of society but for the individual to reflect upon herself and her personal belief system. It is also important to understand how culture is defined and for individuals to identify the prejudices and biases she or he brings to teaching.

It seems apparent that educating teachers about cultural differences is essential for successful inclusion, and university professors are important in advancing the knowledge base of, and promoting reflective practices among, their students. Newly certified teachers or teachers seeking change for a variety of reasons who apply for job opportunities may not necessarily teach in the same area in which they were educated, making multicultural diversity training an important component of teacher preparation programs.

The university at which I teach was recently reaccredited and was awarded distinctive scores for the infusion of 18 multicultural goals into core curriculum areas. These goals encompass not only the acceptance of racial differences, but include cultural issues in school/family relationships, socio-economics, bilingualism, disabilities, environmental concerns, and gender. Various goals are introduced in courses early in the students program, reinforced in others, and mastered in the advanced courses within the program.

Specifically, in one course on "Educational Psychology," pre-service teachers are afforded the opportunity to identify and examine their beliefs and evaluate how their interpretations and preconceptions affect them and the students with whom they work. Numerous small group and large group activities are planned that promote dialogue and foster the understanding of alternative belief systems. The development of goals and objectives promote reflective practices and the opportunity to explore for misconceptions and philosophical stances.

However, there may be additional strategies necessary to promote even better programming, and that should, in my opinion, be a goal for any educational institution. Active engagement with, and dialogue between, professionals throughout the world opens the doors of possibility and may, in effect, "Make a World of Difference" in the lives of children around the world.

Reflection

P. Angelides, an assistant professor in Cyprus, developed a strategy for teachers to reflect upon critical incidents whereby teachers "confront the values, beliefs and assumptions that have shaped their thinking, directed their actions and driven their reflection" (Angelides, 2001, p. 21). He has found that what a practitioner brings to their profession in terms of intuition and feelings are important ingredients to explore and that reflection practices have "opened up new possibilities for understanding" (p. 20). Thus, it seems important that teachers have the ability to scrutinize, analyze, and interpret their beliefs that might act as barriers to the inclusion of students with special needs. Reflective practices are varied and include the ability to reflect for, on, and in action (Lee & Zuercher, 1993). By self-examination in these three areas, individuals can effect change not only for themselves but also for the system in which they work (Angelides, 2001). Change may occur when individuals who have struggled with and reflected upon specific issues recognize the need for alternatives and share their insights with others.

An example of sharing ideas and strategies recently occurred between L. Dyson, a professor in Canada, and her colleague N. Zhang, a professor in the People's Republic of China. In their research, they found similarities regarding the importance of teacher attitudes toward inclusion-based practices. They stated that a "positive philosophy toward mainstreaming, competence with classroom management, and confidence in their (teachers) ability to teach children with disabilities" (p. 54) as key components for successful inclusion-based practices. Although they hypothesized that different attitudes would exist between the two countries due to "differences in cultural beliefs and practice" (p. 53), their results indicated that "there appear to be similar attitudes between teachers in the two countries" (pp. 53-54). It seems as though we may be more similar than dissimilar in our perspectives to provide appropriate education programs for students with identified disabilities no matter the geographical location.

Professionals in Poland are also concerned about teacher attitudes towards inclusion (Jaszcyszyn & Halaburda, 2001). Research by Jaszcyszyn and Halaburda (2001) suggest a need for additional training that facilitates self-knowledge about assumptions and an increased knowledge base about the concept of integrating students with special needs with typically developing peers. The ability to reflect upon one's attitude and preconceptions may underlie the type of in-class programming a child receives and will differ from teacher to teacher and placement to placement.

It was also found important for parents of children with disabilities to reframe their experiences (Joshi & Sharma, 2001) into more positive meaning. Positive reframing promotes a sense of satisfaction in which the focus of a parent shifts from the disability (or disabilities) to the abilities of the child as well. It becomes essential to understand the family cultures that may exist within families to better provide for their unique needs. There may very well be cultural differences that "influence families' perceptions of many aspects of interaction intervention, including what constitutes good parent-child interactions, appropriateness of interaction as a focus for intervention, and acceptable approaches for providing intervention" (McCollum, 2001, p. 118). Thus, understanding and accepting cultural differences, reflecting on assumptions regarding various cultures and belief systems, and "talking with families about their beliefs about interacting with their children" (McCollum, 2001, p. 119) are important. Once again, the reflection component is key to understanding oneself and accepting diversity.

Language-Related Factors

Aside from understanding oneself and accepting others for who they are, the specific academic needs of children of various cultures must be addressed. Meeting the unique learning needs of the second language learner is a concern for one professor in South Africa who notes that in some areas of the country, instruction is provided to children in English, which is not their native language (DeWitt, 2001). What complicates the matter is that some children may experience language-based difficulties in their native tongue, and thus accurate assessment and testing may be difficult to obtain. It is quite possible that a student may have a disability in language-based skills in his or her primary language and thus, may manifest even more debilitating skills when attempting to learn when knowledge is imparted in a second language.

Compounding the problem is world globalization access in which travel to and from other countries is becoming easier and easier due to the multitude of and access to various modes of transportation. For example, in the United States a variety of languages can be heard in public schools, so much so, that certificates are offered to teachers in second-language learning and even in bilingual special education. The university at which I teach was awarded a federally-funded grant for a number of years to design a program that meets the needs of students with exceptionalities whose primary language was something other than English. Another certificate was offered in the early- to mid-1990s to train special education professionals to serve as consultants to general education teachers because of the new interpretations of the law promoting inclusion-based practices. It should be noted, however, that all students who were enrolled in the program were special education professionals and not general education teachers. Thus, these special educators were trained in various forms of consultation and collaboration. Some were unable to implement this knowledge appropriately because the persons with whom they were consulting (i.e., general education teachers) did not have the background knowledge and an extensive understanding of collaborative problem solving, as did the special educators.

Additionally, in Croatia, a team approach is used to promote appropriate integration practices to conduct assessments and monitor progress. Education professionals and parents collaborated to form the Croatian Association for Professional Help to Children with Special Needs in 1994 to "provide organizational and professional support for the integration of children with special needs into social environments" (p. 95). Team approaches are common throughout the United States, but true integrative procedures that solicit important information from medical practitioners, neurologists, and neuropsychologists are still lacking. It is important to reframe our notions of specific disabling conditions and recognize that there may very well be overflow of dysfunction into other areas (Zera, 2001). Comprehensive assessments, truly reflective practices, and team efforts are important to plan effectively for the needs of individuals.

It is not just a matter of understanding cultures, reflecting on various practices, dialoguing with fellow professionals, and adapting programs to meet the needs of second language-learners for an inclusion program to be effective and successful. Parents need to be part of the discussion and children need to become part of the fabric of the school community.

Socialization

Aside from meeting the educational needs of children, another major purpose of some inclusion models is to advance social interactions of those with disabilities with typically developing peers. "An appropriate placement is one in which the social, emotional, and educational growth of the student is not restricted" (Wood, Lazzari, & Reeves, 1993, p. 6). Therefore, it is important to help children develop and foster friendships within such models and to use experiential learning opportunities (Dyson, 2001). Another suggestion from two professors in the United States (Ludy & Petersen, 2001) is to enhance storytelling using balloon art activities in which balloons are blown up and sculpted to portray characters from a story. Ludy and Petersen (2001) found that storytelling not only helps in "developing appropriate educational activities that provide for the active involvement of children" (p. 109), but it also helps listeners understand themselves and "broadens awareness of other cultures and gives listeners a deeper understanding of their own [culture]" (2001, p. 110).

A former special educator with 17 years experience in the United States suggested that another way to interactively engage and promote learning in young children is to use music as a medium (Martin, 2001). She noted that activities can be created that promote children interacting with each other as they clap to music, shake hands, and move to the music (Martin, 2001). In Poland, music is also used as a form of therapy for children with special needs, helping them develop (Jutrzyna, 2001). Jutrzyna states that music "influences our senses and feelings; is understood by everyone; and can reach an individual at any level of intelligence or education" (p. 88). Multicultural music centers can be created (Wood, 1993) to explore the diversity of cultures and promote acceptance and understanding. Music may be one of the common denominators between cultures even if it differs tremendously in form from one nation to another.

International Collaborative Efforts

Numerous collaborative efforts such as those previously mentioned (e.g., between professors in Canada and China, professionals and parents within Croatia, personnel in the United States and in the numerous other countries affiliated with the IASE organization) are helping to actively examine, reflect, guide, and promote the successful inclusion of special education children into appropriately designed programs. Emerging themes of these collaborations and dialogue are (a) promoting an understanding and acceptance of various cultures; (b) developing critical reflective practices; (c) supporting the "whole child" and his or her family; (d) recognizing the needs of, and planning appropriate programs for, second-language learners; and (e) providing positive social interactions that foster the development of social skills. The key to success seems to be through active engagement and participation, maintaining and extending the dialogue, reflecting for/on/in practice, and promoting additional collaborative efforts.

Because of similarities and differences in action research throughout the world, we, as practitioners should engage in more dialogue. We have much to learn about inclusion-based practices, for example, and new insights and information from others can help us learn about the ways to assess its effectiveness. As a result of this research, it is my intention to facilitate such dialogue by organizing a more comprehensive review of our practices. In anticipation of the next conference of the International Association of Special Education to be held in Hong Kong in July 2003, I have contacted some of the practitioners cited in this paper to develop an action research plan regarding additional study of inclusion-based practices from around the world. A roundtable discussion at the conference would facilitate that dialogue. With members of 35 countries attending this conference, we will aim to share important information and better prepare for future undertakings in action research in international educational settings.

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