



EFFECTIVE PRACTICES in Special Programs

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Professional Development

This issue of Effective Practices introduces you to two Alberta schools that have used professional development opportunities to improve an inclusive learning environment for their students.

Many teachers are searching for ways to implement the department *Educational Placement of Students with Special Needs* policy. The policy states that the first placement option considered by school boards, in consultation with students, parents/guardians and school staff, shall be to educate students with special needs in regular classrooms in neighbourhood or local schools.

At Dr. E. W. Coffin School, where close to 30% of the student population is identified with special needs or English as a Second Language, teaching and support staff were involved in a unique professional development partnership. The Janet Johnstone School developed an effective practice to extend their existing inclusive philosophy. Both schools worked with the Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre (DDRC) of Calgary.

Other access points for professional development in Alberta include Special Programs Branch's annual Special Education conference and Alberta's Regional Consortia (see contact information on page 6).

Current Research on Professional Development

Professional development helps teachers to develop their expertise and to improve the learning environment for their students. A review of current research indicates that professional development for teachers includes the following benefits.

Discovering innovative approaches to teaching.
Experiencing theory put into practice.
Validating and sharing teaching experiences.
Encouraging the creation of a community of learners.
Linking teachers to other professionals.
Optimizing one's potential.
Pairing subject matter with pedagogy.
Measuring the impact on student learning.
Engaging oneself in lifelong learning.
Networking to ensure mentors are known.
Training to prepare for the future.

"It seems like such a simple thing to do, to include everyone, but it has taken an outside eye to help us see some new ways to help everyone feel and, truly be, included in our school."

– Resource Teacher, Janet Johnstone School

Reflective Practice at Dr. E. W. Coffin School

Dr. E. W. Coffin School serves approximately 200 students from Kindergarten to grade 6 in Calgary's northwest. 27–30% of the student population is identified with special needs or English as a Second Language.

Throughout the 2000/2001 school year, teaching and support staff at Dr. E. W. Coffin School were involved in a unique partnership with the DDRRC of Calgary. This collaborative venture focused on the identification and establishment of successful school-based structures to support:

- effective learning practices for all students
- a more inclusive environment in the school community.

Through the partnership, Pat Maas, an “inclusion facilitator”, was placed in the school for three full days per week. Funds were available to purchase materials and facilitate release time for teachers and support staff for professional development experiences. The inclusion facilitator was always student focused, but supported the students in a unique way – by building capacity in their teachers and support workers. The staff will be able to use this professional development experience to sustain new effective practices over time.

“Where the inclusion facilitator really helped us was in the identification of the subtle things that were happening in and around the school. It was the awareness of those things that really made a difference for us.”

– Teacher and Education Assistant

The inclusion facilitator began by observing the “big picture”, including classrooms, playground areas and the school as a whole. She then spoke with students, staff and parents. The facilitator assessed the success of the established patterns of working with students with identified learning needs. She looked at classroom dynamics. Instructional needs were then collaboratively established by the inclusion facilitator, individuals and teams of teachers.

The inclusion facilitator helped school staff to review and evaluate:

- leadership
- vision and beliefs
- organizational structure and staff deployment
- a focus on professional development.

The inclusion facilitator considered:

- classroom structure and dynamics
- use of instructional skills and strategies for diverse learners
- planning for diversity.

The inclusion facilitator supported the development of:

- individual professional learning goals and needs
- connections to the School Growth Plan.

“This role was unlike any I had previously held in my teaching career. It was more like an on-site professional developer with a specific “collaboratively developed lens.” My job did not look the same from one day to the next, nor did I ever feel directionless. Everything we did contributed in some way to the overall purpose: building our capacity to meet the needs of all students.”

– P. Maas, Inclusion Facilitator

Impacts of the Partnership on the School Community

One of the key factors that made this project unique was that teachers and support staff had access to an individual who focused specifically on teaching, the classroom climate, and the instructional strategies that promote successful learning opportunities for all students.

The inclusion facilitator was a “critical friend” who gave teachers:

- feedback on their teaching strategies
- more effective techniques for problem solving
- the opportunity to observe a “master teacher” trying new methods
- support in their attempts to work in new ways.

Staff also had the convenience of a person in the school to search out resources for instructional change so that the individual learning needs in their classrooms would be better served. The inclusion facilitator assisted the school by solidifying existing effective inclusive strategies, identifying areas for continued growth, creating a climate of creative problem solving and support, and changing teacher practice to better meet individual learning needs of students.

“The availability of an ‘outside’ pair of eyes to affirm the vision and work of the school has been invaluable in supporting the continuation of our school vision around how to support children at Dr. E. W. Coffin School.”

– J. Chadwick, Principal

The Core Team

A core team of an administrator, teachers, support staff and parents met monthly. The inclusion facilitator supported the meetings by providing video resources, articles and other resources, which were used as catalysts for conversation on effective instructional strategies for students. The group also used the book, *Building Inclusive Schools: Tools and Strategies for Success* as a resource to compare the present instructional practices in the school with current research on inclusive schools.

The Core Team identified two key areas that the school needed to focus on in more direct and planned ways: cooperative learning structures and peer support systems.

The Core Team reviewed the following strategies for use in the school:

- heterogeneous classrooms and groupings
- curriculum designed to address and develop multiple intelligences
- multilevel instruction
- outcome-oriented instruction
- integration of technology across the curriculum
- activity and problem-based learning
- providing models for complex tasks
- opportunities for low-risk practice
- minimizing error repetition
- authentic assessment.

Individual Classroom Work

Teachers were able to access the inclusion facilitator in multiple ways. In her role as a lead teacher she planned and modeled effective lessons using specific cooperative group structures to assist students. Teachers’ feedback in this area included:

“I now realize that I need to spend more time thinking about the structure of my lessons to support the diverse needs of my students and not just focus on the content.”

“We have realized that, as our classrooms become more diverse, we need to continually hone our instructional skills and understandings, not just focus on modification of curriculum content for successful differentiation to occur.”

“I quickly learned that to have a successful cooperative group lesson, you need to take the time to teach the students how to effectively participate in that group. I knew what I wanted the students to accomplish, but it wasn’t happening. By having the inclusion facilitator draw my attention to that, we have come a long way in this classroom.”

Working with Differentiated Learners

Through the support of this project, the staff were able to attend to the complexity of the combination of learners in a classroom. A number of classes completed Multiple Intelligences (MI) inventories. This information was used to assist students in understanding their own current strengths and for appreciating the strengths of others in their classroom. It was also used by teachers to creatively broaden learning strategies so that all students had opportunities to work within their preferred comfort areas. Social skill activities and role-playing around peer support were part of the project as students were challenged with peer issues in a diverse learning community.

“Since the work of this project was to establish present effective strategies and determine future directions, we were excited about how this project facilitated the opportunity to look critically at our work in the area of differentiation of instruction. We are confident through this process that we are making plans that will address the specific needs of teachers and students to create an even more successful inclusive environment at our school.”

– J. Chadwick, Principal

Implications for Other Schools

Alberta classrooms are becoming more diverse each year. Students with individual learning needs, whether they be emotional, behavioural, cognitive or second language, are present in every classroom. A resource teacher, teacher assistant or other school-based strategist targets identified students for specific support. Most often the focus of team Resource Group Meetings is on specific learning strategies for individual students.

How do teachers take the multiple learning needs of their class, develop curriculum plans and monitor progress in such a complex environment?

It is paramount to have a lead teacher/critical friend who can look at the classroom as whole with an understanding of individual student needs, and then assist the teacher in developing more effective instructional strategies. The teachers found that they needed to continue looking at the “how to”, not just the “what to”, in the teaching day.

“Through this partnership and the creative work and efforts of all stakeholders, our school is on the leading edge of daily practice in meeting the needs of all learners. We have a rich diversity in the school and this partnership has both highlighted this strength and enhanced learning opportunities for all. Through advocacy, conversation, collaboration and proactive action, our school community has grown tremendously this year.”

– Carol Hall, Parent

“As the Principal in the school, I am particularly proud of the collaborative work of my school staff throughout this project. They are an experienced group of professionals that continually questions and reflects on its practice. They have enthusiastically sought out new and better ways to work with children in their classroom. With the support of the inclusion facilitator and the DDRC partnership, I have witnessed changes in classroom climate, teacher expertise and approaches to differentiation of instructional strategies. I know that this partnership has made a difference in our school, for parents, students and staff.”

– J. Chadwick, Principal

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“Better Together” Janet Johnstone School

During the 2001/2002 year, Janet Johnstone School embarked on an extension to the existing inclusive philosophy of the school community. Located in Calgary’s southwest and with a school population of approximately 550, administration, staff, parents and students chose to participate in the Inclusive Schools Initiative in partnership with the Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre (DDRC) of Calgary. Because the school was already operating from a philosophical basis of inclusion, the focus of the Initiative was to work specifically on “social inclusion” of all members of the school community.

“Best practice is only effective when it is supported by the school’s philosophical base and the beliefs of the staff, parents and school community. It has been an ongoing process for us. We have worked together to build an inclusive school and to provide the necessary resources to support success for the students and the teachers. When we talk inclusion we are talking about everyone, not just the special education students. Our school has a reflective culture and holds our School Vision and our School Development Plan as a filter through which we question all of our actions and decisions. The decision to be part of this initiative was easy: it fit within our shared vision as expressed in the Janet Johnstone’s mission statement, “Our school community strives for excellence in learning within an inclusive environment”, and it gave a new dimension of support to all of our students.”

– J. Sherin, Principal



What is friendship facilitation?

The role of the social inclusion facilitator at Janet Johnstone School was to collaborate with teachers, parents and students to develop support, understanding and acceptance of all children. Students who were socially isolated from their peers were a primary focus. Strategies for friendship facilitation and approaches for building peer support formed important research-based keys to connecting isolated students.

Friendship facilitation strategies are easily incorporated for Peer Support clubs, as described in the examples below.

- Peer Support clubs provide opportunities for students to connect, and a facilitator can actively participate in positive interpretations.
- Accommodations are made by peers/the facilitator to enable student participation.
- Activities at an elementary club may follow a progression from more structure to less structure to facilitate the development of natural relationships (start with concrete activities for increasing connections and social competence and evolve to cooperative scriptwriting and the performance of plays).
- Junior and senior high clubs may be recreational clubs such as games/movie clubs that allow friendship facilitation to occur within a natural setting without formalized activities.

What are some approaches for building peer support?

Approaches for building peer support vary in degree of structure from more structured groups to natural relationships and support:

- **More structure** involves goal setting and problem solving such as making action plans and using collaborative problem-solving.
- **Less structure** involves friendship groups and pairs such as student aides, partners at lunch, best buddies and peer connections.
- **Least structure** involves natural relationships and supports such as buddy systems, advocacy and recreational activities.

Peer support can be affected by:

- increasing opportunities
- creating a warm atmosphere
- improving social competence and interaction skills.

Peer support behaviours may be observed when peers:

- lend emotional support
- give access to others
- provide academic support
- give material assistance.

“It’s made such a difference for (student A). He used to be so isolated. Now he’s taking responsibility for his own behaviour (using friendship skills). He asks for feedback. He’s even friends with someone now who gave him a really hard time at the beginning of the year before the Club started.”

– Teacher

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Alberta Learning assists in professional development by providing base funding that allows six Regional Consortia to provide ongoing professional development initiatives to the education community across Alberta. To find out more about the Regional Consortia, visit our Web site for direct links to the consortia at www.learning.gov.ab.ca/department/consortia.asp.

Effective Practices in Special Programs is a newsletter developed in response to the Special Education Review Recommendations #51-52 identified in *Shaping the Future for Students with Special Needs* (November 2000). Each issue includes a summary of current research on a topic and resources or featured school(s) in Alberta that have developed and implemented effective practices.

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