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All Are Welcome: Inclusive Service Delivery in Catholic Schools

Martin K. Scanlan
Alliance for Catholic Education Press, 2009
\$12.50, 77 pages

Reviewed by Sarah Popper

Catholic schools have long struggled with the dichotomy between their social justice mission and the realities of serving students with special needs and English language learners. Historically, Catholic schools have not been as successful as the public system at meeting the needs of these students for a variety of reasons, predominantly financial. As the demographics of Catholics in America have shifted, and the number of non-native English speakers has grown, the demands placed on Catholic schools to serve an ever more diverse student body continue to increase. In *All Are Welcome: Inclusive Service Delivery in Catholic Schools*, Martin Scanlan situates this tension and calls for Catholic schools to examine closely how they are meeting the needs of diverse learners, in particular students with special needs and English language learners.

Like other private educational institutions, Catholic schools differ from the nation's public schools in that they are not required by law to accept and educate all students. Schools are within their legal rights to refuse admission to any student. However, as Scanlan describes it, Catholic schools are called to serve the disadvantaged and marginalized as part of their adherence to Catholic Social Teaching (CST). He writes, "Catholic schools cannot claim to be truly Catholic if they do not diligently strive to adhere to the fundamental teachings of the Church, and CST unambiguously compels Catholic institutions to treat those on the margins with dignity" (p. 7). In no uncertain terms this strong language states that the very essence of a Catholic school lies in its commitment to serving those who have traditionally been marginalized. CST recognizes the inherent dignity, goodness, and Godliness of all individuals. Catholic schools must strive not only to integrate CST into the curriculum, but also use CST as a guide to structure their schools, especially insofar as this relates to recruiting and retaining students with diverse backgrounds and special needs.

Catholic schools have certain legal obligations to provide services to

those with disabilities, albeit to a much lesser degree than mandated in public schools. Scanlan explains that according to Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, all schools that receive federal aid, Catholic schools included, must provide “reasonable accommodations” including “minor adjustments to policies and procedures” for individuals with physical or mental impairments (p. 27). Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990, 1997, 2004), schools must actively seek out students who are in need of support services, and provide them with a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment. Significant, in Scanlan’s interpretation, is that while *all* students have the right to be assessed and receive an individualized education program (IEP), *only* public schools are legally required to carry out the provisions of the IEP. Catholic schools may choose to comply with the IEP, however, when parents place their children in a private school they forfeit the rights of their children guaranteed under IDEA. As a result of these sometimes conflicting legalities, Scanlan notes that students in Catholic schools have traditionally received special education services (if at all) in segregated settings separate from their peers, usually in the form of pull-out support provided by the local public school system.

Scanlan argues that this exclusionary model is incompatible with the tenets of CST, and proposes an alternative service delivery model called Integrated Comprehensive Services (ICS). He writes, “At the heart of ICS is the notion that inclusive service delivery is the most effective and socially just approach to educating all students” (p. 37). The underlying premise of this model is that all educators should be able to serve all students, eliminating the usual divide between regular education and special education teachers. Scanlan describes the four cornerstones of ICS that are integral to its success. The first principle is a focus on equity that mirrors the earlier discussion of CST and the dignity of all beings, the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalized. Having recognized this need for equity, the second principle is establishing structures within the school and broader community that are equitable, including recruitment and student grouping practices. The third cornerstone “focuses on building the capacity of all educators in the school to create teaching and learning for all students” (p. 40). This means cultivating supportive relationships among faculty rather than relying on a group of special educators to educate students with special needs. Finally, resources and policies must be coordinated to ensure the maintenance of the ICS model over time. The primary aim of ICS is to prevent student failure by adopting a holistic approach to teaching and service delivery. Scanlan points out that

under ICS Catholic schools comply with, and indeed, go beyond their legal obligations to serve students with special needs.

ICS is more than just a model of service delivery for students with special needs. Rather, it is a way of systematically restructuring Catholic schools to be able to meet the needs of all students across a range of diversities. In particular, Scanlan describes care teams or “groups of key educators in the school community who regularly meet to address situations in which students are facing difficulties” (p. 49). Care teams are not only concerned with academic difficulties, but social, behavioral, and emotional problems as well. The ICS holistic approach can also be used to address the needs of English language learners, namely by viewing the native language of students as an asset, not a deficit; by accurately assessing students’ level of English proficiency; and by providing high-quality instruction in both English and content areas alongside their peers in the regular classroom.

Scanlan’s discussion of the principles of CST as they apply to Catholic schools and diverse students is thorough, and makes an excellent and inspiring case for meeting the needs of all students in Catholic schools. The flaws of the traditional model of special education service delivery within a Catholic school setting are obvious, and clearly misaligned with the premises of CST. The alternative model of ICS proposed by Scanlan reflects current research on best practices in meeting the needs of English language learners as well as in special education delivery, including Response to Intervention (RTI). This holistic approach parallels existing projects in urban schools such as City Connects or Boston Catholic Schools Connects, both at Boston College. ICS is an ideal model of service delivery that would be beneficial if adopted in both public and private schools. However, ICS does place a tremendous amount of responsibility on the classroom teacher, and as a result schools would need to provide extensive support for these educators, including professional development and additional classroom personnel, in order for this model to be successful. Schools would also likely need to raise salaries to be able to compete with the public schools and hire highly qualified and multi-qualified teachers. Given the already troubled finances of many urban Catholic schools, it seems unlikely that most would be able to do so. The key to sustaining this model may be to develop partnerships with universities and community organizations that would be able to provide these schools with access to additional resources and support.

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