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Inclusion in Catholic Schools: From Inception to Implementation

Cover Page Footnote

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Inclusion in Catholic Schools: From Inception to Implementation

Christine M. Bonfiglio¹ and Karen Guy Kroh²

Abstract: Inclusion of students with diverse learning needs, including those with disabilities, in Catholic schools is becoming more prevalent. Despite a long history of the call to serve all learners, Catholic schools have been slow to welcome students who are academically and behaviorally diverse. Meeting the needs of all learners requires understanding the concept of inclusion, removing barriers, and implementing inclusive educational practices. This article defines inclusion and its prevalence in Catholic schools in comparison to national trends in the public domain. Identified barriers to successful inclusive education are identified and described. Additionally, effective practices are outlined and illustrated using a Catholic school example. To this end, the article aims to introduce proven effective practices for successful implementation in the hope that more Catholic schools will embrace this mission and effectively meet the needs of all students.

Keywords: inclusion, Catholic schools, barriers, disability, inclusive practice

Catholic teaching consistently calls us to serve all individuals, thereby creating an inclusive community. This call can be found in Scripture in the Old Testament through the creation story in Genesis (Genesis 1:26-27) and in the subsequent message of deliverance (e.g., in Exodus when God delivers the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians). The message is clear: Humans have God-given dignity, for we are made in His likeness. Moreover, through baptism, we have been redeemed. In the New Testament, we see Jesus as healer and embracer of all people. He is often seated at a table with diverse individuals, welcoming and building community with those

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on the margins. In addition to all that is modeled by Jesus, official Church documents support the notion of inclusion of persons with disabilities, the poor, refugees, immigrants, and the under-served in PK-12 Catholic education (Frabutt, 2013).

Despite our call, Catholic schools have a long history of under-serving diverse populations, specifically students with disabilities (SWDs). Often this is not a failure in misunderstanding the call or a lack of desire to do His works. Instead, our lack of service is frequently due to a fear that our knowledge and resources are deficient.

The intent of this article is to define meaningful inclusion, describe the prevalence rates of SWDs, present the barriers for Catholic schools, as well as outline evidence-based practices for successful inclusion in the Catholic school context. To this end, the article presents inclusive structures from inception to implementation.

Inclusion Defined

The charge of defining inclusion is a considerable one given the current academic, social/emotional, and cultural diversity in schools—both public and private. What is inclusion? More specifically, what is inclusion in Catholic schools, and how does it meaningfully integrate SWDs?

From a practical standpoint, it seems reasonable to refer to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)—the federal law mandating that public education provide SWDs with access to the general education curriculum—to gain insight that is generalizable to parochial schools. IDEA (2004) requires inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom alongside their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent possible. Thus, federal law approaches inclusion from the principle of least restrictive environment (LRE; one of the six principles under IDEA) rather than providing a specific definition of inclusion (Smith & Cheatham, this issue). The LRE is a continuum of placements and services available to SWDs that must be aligned with students' educational strengths and needs. Moreover, it must offer the "least" restriction—or time outside of general education. Many in the field of education attest that using the LRE has been the default approach to serving students with disabilities (H. R. Turnbull et al., 2007).

Given the term environment in IDEA, many educators have focused on the setting when considering instructional practice. For example, Theoharis & Causton (2014) defined inclusion using the placement of students, allowing for full access to general education curriculum, instruction, and peers. Proposing a similar definition, Friend & Bursuck (2006) offered a different perspective on setting, contending that inclusive practices represent a philosophy or belief that SWDs should be integrated in the general education classroom with a focus on their instruction based on abilities rather than disabilities.

In addition to these differing philosophies, special education surrounding the LRE principle has consistently been misinterpreted, such that the defining feature is based on a specific location rather than a set of services and supports. Thus, although the law indicates a preference for inclusion (i.e., in the general education classroom), special education services continue to be conflated with location, resulting in many SWDs being served outside of the general education setting (Ryndak et al., 2014).

Current definitions of inclusive education are replacing this placement focus, however, moving toward a more comprehensive description that focuses on a range of placements and meaningful participation in curricula and activities with an emphasis on student outcomes (Kurth et al., 2017). The process of delivering services and including students in the general education setting has been attributed to a philosophy that affirms inclusion as SWDs being accepted, respected, and valued members of the community (Friend & Bursuck, 2006) and afforded the same opportunities as their nondisabled peers (Amado et al., 2013; McLeskey et al., 2014; Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2017).

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in the United States Department of Education has outlined specific elements for early childhood inclusion that Smith and Cheatham (this issue) posit may be used as a model definition for inclusion of SWDs of all ages.

Including children with disabilities in general early childhood programs together with their peers without disabilities; holding high expectations and intentionally promoting participation in all learning and social activities, facilitated by individualized accommodations; and using evidence-based services and supports to foster [children's] development of friendship with peers, and sense of belonging. (OSEP, 2015, p. 3)

Comprehensive review of the topic—defining inclusion—is beyond the scope of this paper.³ However, for purposes of this paper and the special issue overall, we will align our definition of meaningful inclusion with the guidelines outlined by the OSEP. That is, inclusion goes beyond the physical space and meaningfully integrates curricula, materials, and best practices to provide support to SWDs within the general education setting with their nondisabled peers.

Prevalence of Students with Disabilities and Inclusion

When defining students with disabilities and their subsequent inclusion, it appears appropriate to first explore these topics within the public school context given their long-standing practice in public schools compared to Catholic schools. According to the most recent National Center for Education Statistics report (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), the number of public school students ages 3-21 receiving special education services during the 2015-16 academic year was 6.7 million (13.2%)—a slight increase from the 2014-15 figure of 6.6 million (13%). Of this

³ Refer to the Smith and Cheatham article in this special issue for a more in-depth review of the definition, characteristics, requirements and expectations of inclusion.

13.2%, approximately 4.6% were diagnosed with a specific learning disability, 2.7% with a speech or language impairment, 1.8% with other health impairment, and 1.2% with autism spectrum disorder (NCES, 2018). Since 2007, there has been a .5% decrease in serving a specific learning disability under IDEA along with 5% increases in both autism spectrum disorders and other health impairments (United States Department of Education [USDoE], 2018). Please refer to Table 1 for a delineation of data across eligibility categories.

Table 1

Inclusion of Students with Disabilities (ages 6-21 years) in U.S. Public General Education per Disability Category

Category	% of Students with Disabilities	% Spending \geq 80% of school day in general education
Specific learning disability	38.6	70.8
Speech or language impairment	16.8	87.0
Other health impairment	15.4	66.4
Autism	9.6	39.4
Intellectual disability	6.9	17.0
Emotional disturbance	5.5	47.2

Note. Adapted from *40th Annual report to congress on the implementation of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* by U.S. Department of Education, 2018.

In 2016, almost 95% of students with disabilities (ages 6-21) were served in regular public schools. The remaining 5% were served as follows: (a) in separate schools for SWDs (3%), (b) in private regular schools at their parents' request (approximately 1%), or (c) in separate residential facilities, homebound, or correctional facilities (less than 1% [US DoE, 2018]). Of the high percentage of students served in regular schools, the US DoE (2018) reports that the percentage of time they spend in general education classrooms varies and is dependent on the severity of needs. For example, 63.1% of students spent the majority of their day (80%) in classrooms with peers, 18.3% spent 40-79%, and 13.4% spent less than 40% in the general education classroom. (Please refer to Table 1 for further delineation per category).⁴ For a broader contextualization of the recent history of inclusion and SWDs in the public sector, please refer to Smith and Cheatham's work in this special issue.

While the statistics for students with disabilities and inclusion under IDEA (2004) are explored and published annually in the public sector, the specific data regarding this population in Catholic schools are not as readily available. Of utmost importance is the realization that SWDs are attending Catholic schools and have been doing so for decades, though in smaller numbers than in public

⁴ Refer to the Smith and Cheatham article in this special issue for a broader contextualization of inclusion and SWDs in the public system.

schools. As indicated above, approximately 1% or 67,000 students with disabilities are attending regular private schools per parent request. Approximately 40% of those private schools are identified as Catholic schools (US DoE, 2018). However, the specifics of prevalence and the practice of inclusion are not well defined or consistently reported in our unique Catholic environment.

Nonetheless, the following current statistics are available. The National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) reported that in 2017-18, there were 6,289 Catholic schools (5,092 elementary and 1,197 secondary) serving a combined total of 1,789,363 students. Of this population, 5.1% have some form of diagnosed disability (NCEA, 2018), which is considerably discrepant from the national statistics (13.2%). In addition, students with mild to moderate disabilities were served in 78.4% of Catholic schools (NCES, 2018). According to a recent (2019) national survey of approximately half of the K-8 Catholic schools in the United States, over 20% of some of the surveyed school populations were identified with a disability and eligible for services under IDEA (Bonfiglio et al., 2019). Previously, a 2002 study commissioned by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) determined that 7% of students in Catholic schools had a diagnosed disability compared to the 11.4% public school counterpart (USCCB, 2002).

Although the data reported above contain inconsistencies and much remains to be done to collect these types of data systematically on an annual basis, the one evident and consistent message is that students with disabilities are included in Catholic schools. It is important, therefore, to move past the question of “Are we serving SWDs?” We have that answer ... yes! Instead, we should be critically asking, “Are the SWDs in our Catholic schools the recipients of meaningful inclusion (defined above)?” That is, “How are we serving them?”

Recent research affirms that a growing number of Catholic schools are accepting SWDs and providing support (DeFiore, 2006; Durow, 2007; Scanlan, 2008). However, the type and level of support offered varies widely (Bello, 2006; Bonfiglio et al., 2019; Durow, 2007; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002).

In 2002, the USCCB estimated that more than 185,000 students with disabilities attended Catholic schools. However, only approximately 13,000 (7%) had an eligible diagnosis. Of this 7%, only 1% were receiving service under IDEA. Despite the acceptance of students with disabilities, 87% of dioceses surveyed reported a lack of capacity to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

To further explore this issue, Bello (2006) randomly sampled 300 Catholic high schools to examine the issues they experienced while developing and implementing inclusion. Of the 150 responses, the majority reported offering special education services (63%), as opposed to structured special education programming (14.8%) or a department of special education (22.2%). Types of services varied across a continuum of placement (e.g., from general education classes with accommodations [92.6%] to self-contained services [3.7%]), mentoring services (18.5%),

peer tutoring (6.9%), and related services, including speech-language (14.8%), and counseling (68.5%). Although the study clearly showed the variety of ways in which SWDs were served, it also described the challenges the schools reported in providing those services. Limited financial and personnel resources were the most prevalent challenges, noted by all respondents, followed by limited knowledge and skillset (92% of respondents) regarding how to service SWDs. Durow (2007) confirmed these findings, concluding that the strategy most implemented for SWDs was adjustments made by the classroom teacher.

A decade later, Bonfiglio et al. (2019) explored the prevalence of SWDs in Catholic schools and current service delivery practices. Preliminary results indicate increased numbers of SWDs participating in Catholic schools and more varied services. These data, as well as the specifics of the findings, will be made available in the near future.

Support for Inclusive Practice

There are benefits to including students with disabilities in the general education setting both for students with and without disabilities. Thus, implementing evidence-based strategies with collaborative efforts can lead to more effective instruction for all students. High-leverage practices typically seen as specific to SWDs (e.g., collaboration, explicit instruction, flexible grouping) can also have positive effects on students without disabilities (McLeskey & Brownell, 2015). In addition, a plethora of academic, behavioral, and social/emotional interventions have shown evidence of meeting a wide range of student needs (Burns et al., 2017).

Research indicates that students with disabilities who participate in inclusive settings with peers without disabilities perform better than their counterparts in less integrated settings (Rea et al., 2002; Soukup et al., 2007). For example, SWDs who have access to the core curriculum in the general education setting demonstrate increases in academic achievement in reading and math. Further, achievement is positively correlated to the time spent in this classroom (Cosier et al., 2013; Rea et al., 2002). That is, as the number of hours in general education increases, so do reading and math scores (Cosier et al., 2013).

In addition to improved academic performance, there are greater opportunities for SWDs to grow in social interaction and communication (Rafferty et al., 2003). Access to both academic and social opportunities not available in segregated settings allows for exposure to desired behavior (Downing & Eichinger, 2008). Therefore, SWDs improve in these areas partly due to the modeling of behavior by peers in general education classrooms (Carter & Kennedy, 2006).

Although the evidence supports benefits for SWDs in an inclusive setting, historically, there has been concern that inclusive education adversely affects the academic performance of students without disabilities because educator time will be diverted to the needs of SWDs. However, several meta-analyses have refuted this contention, and substantiated the benefits for ALL students

when peers with disabilities are included in the general classroom. Specifically, students without disabilities benefit from inclusive settings from the implementation of high-leverage practices, interventions, and strategies (Kalambouka et al., 2007; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009; Szumski et al., 2017). Social benefits are also present, including higher levels of acceptance and empathy by students without disabilities (Katz & Mirenda, 2002; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009).

In the most recent meta-analysis, Szumski and colleagues (2017) compared two settings—students without disabilities in inclusive settings versus students without disabilities in non-integrated settings (i.e., without students with disabilities). This direct comparison allowed for better delineation of the effects of setting and services on typically achieving peers. Results showed increased academic achievement in the inclusive setting. That is, students without disabilities had higher academic performance when learning with students of varied abilities, including those with disabilities, than their peers in less integrated classrooms (Szumski et al., 2017).

Barriers to Inclusion

While Catholic schools seek to serve all students, in reality they can fall short of this ideal for a variety of reasons (Scanlan, 2009). Despite the evidence supporting inclusion, certain barriers have been identified that cause hardship for schools during implementation of integration of SWDs, including: (a) lack of culture, (b) lack of resources, and (c) lack of knowledge and skills.

Lack of Culture

Resistance to inclusion due to pessimistic mindsets of teachers is a formidable barrier to inclusive education (Trump & Hange, 1996). For example, teachers in the general education setting may be overwhelmed with the demands placed on them by the increasing number of students with diverse learning needs placed in their classrooms (Shoho & Katims, 1998). Thus, negative teacher attitude has been found to be one of the most significant barriers to inclusion (Crocket et al., 2012). According to A. Turnbull et al. (2010), teachers may feel students with disabilities need a specialized environment to be successful and that not all students are their responsibility. Such negativity taints the culture and prevents a shared philosophy of all are welcome, which is necessary to support students of varied ability levels (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). In addition, Boyle and Hernandez (2016) found that 18.2% of principals identified teacher attitudes or negative mindsets as barriers to successful inclusion.

Lack of Resources

Meaningful inclusion requires substantial resources. Specifically, ensuring evidence-based frameworks and practices are in place to support the variability of learners requires commitment to providing adequate personnel, professional development, and programming. Adequate

implementation of effective practices ensures successful outcomes for SWDs. Thus, budget, time allocation, and the dearth of supports become obstacles.

IDEA (2004) mandates a free and appropriate public education for all students with disabilities. Not surprisingly, inclusion of SWDs in the general education classroom can require additional faculty and staff (i.e., special educators, paraprofessionals, and specialists). In addition, alternate curricula, activities, and technology may be needed to support diverse learning needs. For these reasons, many view inclusion as a costly endeavor (Crockett et al., 2012). Under IDEA (2004), Catholic schools receive a small allocation of federal funds for the provision of services to students with identified disabilities. However, federal funds do not meet the entire financial obligation of providing services to students with disabilities (DeFiore, 2006).

Historically, lack of funding in Catholic schools has been voiced as a barrier for inclusion (Bello, 2006; Crowley & Wall, 2007; Durow, 2007). Bello (2006) investigated the attributes, challenges, and needs of Catholic high schools when attempting to implement specialized services to students with disabilities. Survey results from a stratified random sample of 300 Catholic high schools indicated that 96.2% reported that finances or funding was a primary challenge. Moreover, 64.8% of schools ranked funding as their number one obstacle to implementation. On a smaller scale, Durow (2007) surveyed 19 midwestern Catholic schools regarding inclusive practices; of these, 14 (73.7%) indicated limited funds as a barrier. More recently, Boyle and Hernandez (2016) identified financial constraints as the most frequently reported barrier to inclusion (43.6% of principals). Catholic schools struggle to fund services and personnel to appropriately include and support students with disabilities (Burke & Griffin, 2016). Given insufficient federal and state funds, Catholic schools are left to seek out local funding sources and grants in order to serve their students with exceptionalities (DeFiore, 2006).

Effectively supporting diverse learning needs (both students with and without disabilities) requires evidence-based practices. Kurth et al. (2017) outlined a series of indicators of quality inclusive education, including multi-tiered systems of support and other evidence-based practices (e.g., general education class membership, progress monitoring, peer supports). Implementing these practices with fidelity requires thoughtful, shared planning time. Allocating time for collaboration can be difficult (Friend & Bursuck, 2006). Teachers are expected to attend many meetings for learning and collaboration and have various other demands on their time. In addition, paraprofessionals often have competing duties (e.g., bus duty or lunch duty) during meeting times, making collaboration difficult (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011).

The above constraints are barriers both within the public domain and in Catholic schools (Bello, 2006; Durow, 2007). Catholic schools historically have held a perception of “one size fits all” with regard to education and, therefore, do not have the necessary knowledge to address multiple aspects of diversity (Durow, 2007). In addition, limited time is a barrier to addressing the multiple

challenges of implementing inclusion as the time barrier can affect teachers' knowledge and skills in implementing inclusive education (Bello, 2006).

Lack of Knowledge and Skills

The third categorical barrier to implementing inclusion in Catholic schools is a lack of knowledge and skills among the staff. Lack of specialized training and educator experience has been reported to be an obstacle to successful service of students with disabilities (Crowley & Wall, 2007; Durow, 2007). For example, Durow (2007) found that 50% of the Catholic school systems surveyed indicated a lack of trained teachers and/or shortage of teachers with special education certification as a barrier to Catholic school inclusion. The most recent Catholic school studies report commensurate findings. Boyle and Hernandez (2016) noted that 29.1% of surveyed principals reported lack of experience and training as a constraint. Similarly, Bonfiglio et al. (2019) found that teacher knowledge of students with disabilities and teacher preparation of serving SWDs rated among the top identified major obstacles to successful inclusion.

Catholic school principals are met with the above obstacles on a routine basis as they consider the diverse learning needs of their students—both with and without disabilities. In fact, one of the most painful conversations is one wherein a family is informed that the school cannot meet the special needs of one of their children, requiring them to transfer the student (and often other siblings) to a public school (DeFiore, 2006). The demand for services outweighs the capacity of the Catholic school and, therefore, all parties involved are left feeling frustrated and inadequate. Often, elimination of these painful encounters is the much-needed motivation to appeal to diocesan officials to overcome the above obstacles.

Envisioning Inclusion in Catholic Schools

The tenets of the Catholic faith embrace the idea of inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools. From Catholic social teaching to the model of Jesus as Teacher in Scripture, the foundation for inclusion is clear. However, as detailed in this paper, moving from the inception of the idea of inclusion to implementation is the challenge.

Inclusion requires a culture of all are welcome. However, it is more than a willingness to open the doors. Changing the culture is necessary. In addition, mere enrollment of a student with disabilities in a Catholic school does not ensure that the student is meaningfully integrated into the fabric of the school. McLeskey & Waldron (2006) suggested adopting Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) to create “sustainable programs that improve educational outcomes for all students” (p. 270).

The following six guiding CSR principles direct successful implementation: (a) Change must have the support of all educational stakeholders (e.g., central office/diocese, building principals,

and teachers). (b) Schools must feel empowered to manage their change. (c) School change efforts for inclusion must address improving a school for all students—not just those with disabilities. (d) Change must be tailored to students’ needs and the educators’ expertise within each school. (e) Change must be built on valid effective practices. And (f) Change should focus on making differences commonplace within the various school settings for all students (McLeskey & Waldron, 2006).

Bringing about CSR is not easy. It takes time, resources, knowledge, and skill. These present significant challenges to implementation of inclusion unto themselves. However, the organization and governance of the Catholic Church can add another layer of complexity.

Catholic schools operate under the principle of subsidiarity. That is, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) 1894 states, “In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, neither the state nor any larger society should substitute itself for the initiative and responsibilities of individuals and intermediary bodies” (USCCB, 2010, p. 462). Therefore, the pastor, school administrator, and teachers within the local Catholic school are the individuals responsible for implementing the changes that support inclusive education. This differs from the public school model in which change often is directed at the district level. In Catholic schools, the role of the (Arch)diocesan Catholic School Office is to provide guidance and counsel to schools within their (Arch)diocese. Through the support of (Arch)diocesan staff and the intentional work of local personnel in addressing school reform, culture, resource, knowledge and skill, each Catholic school and parish community can become “one body in Christ.” The following explores the ways Catholic schools can remove these barriers and achieve this mission.

School Culture

School culture is primary in the implementation of inclusion. Many elements contribute to school culture, including its values, symbols, beliefs, traditions, norms, habits, and customs. Every school is unique, and its culture may be open or closed, inclusive or exclusive, transparent or unclear, flexible or rigid. A strong school culture has faculty and students who act in a particular way because it is the norm—the way things are done (Pejza, 1985).

Creating an inclusive school culture can be one of the greatest challenges for a school leader. To create a school culture that is sustainable, staff, students, and stakeholders must work together (Kansas Technical Assistance System Network, 2009). Sustainability occurs when inclusive-minded administrators educate their communities, offer and promote dialogue, adopt policies that support inclusion, and incorporate school-wide approaches Ryan (2010).

Catholic school culture is unique, with a religious mission of helping to form Disciples of Christ at the core, while educating the whole person. Each student is made in the likeness of God’s image, and possesses talents, gifts, and diverse needs. T. Cook (2001) defined Catholic school culture as

a “way of life” rooted in Christ, a Gospel-based creed and code, and a Catholic vision that provides inspiration and identity, is shaped over time, and is passed from one generation to the next through devices that capture and stimulate the Catholic imagination such as symbols and traditions. (p.16)

It is the Catholic school’s responsibility to draw out these gifts and assist students in achieving their God-given individual and collective potential (T. Cook, 2001). Therefore, Catholic school culture must create beliefs and practices that focus on the intrinsic value of the human person and the unique gifts each person brings to the school community while recognizing that students, families, teachers, and administrators are all part of the larger faith community of the Catholic school.

As important as creating a culture conducive to meaningful inclusion is, equally important is regularly evaluating the culture to ensure its ongoing adequacy. Beyond observing some of the aforementioned practices, specific criteria may be used when evaluating a school’s culture and values. For example, T. Cook (2001) emphasized the importance of reviewing the mission statement of the school. A school’s mission statement should portray the culture of its identity, inspiration, and destiny, and the language should be well integrated. In addition, the mission statement should provide specific evidence of its applicability to school operations. It should be driving culture, policy, and practices within the school. Specifically, an inclusive school should have inclusive language integrated within the mission statement that displays an intentional commitment to inclusion. School leaders should integrate these beliefs into curriculum, instruction, and decision-making. Therefore, school materials and the allocation of school resources provide evidence of mission and the culture of the Catholic school. Moreover, the school’s mission statement is evidence that the school leaders are creating inclusive cultures by living out their mission statements daily.

Creating “Buy-In”

While our faith provides the foundation for why inclusion is important for Catholic schools, creating buy-in from stakeholders (i.e., administrators, teachers and families) can be an obstacle given negative attitudes toward implementing inclusion. However, such negativity can be addressed, effectively creating a positive change and impacting successful inclusion. For example, Boyle and Hernandez (2017) found that administrators with positive attitudes toward inclusion reported higher percentages of students with special education plans (i.e., Individualized Education Program [IEP], 504 Plan) within the school.

The step in altering such attitudes requires that all stakeholders involved with a student’s educational process examine their philosophical beliefs on the issue (Kern, 2016). Philosophical beliefs must align with the vision of the school. Villa & Thousand (2003) encouraged administrators to publicly articulate the vision in order to build consensus and encourage active involvement.

Determining a school's readiness for inclusion and establishing an inclusive vision is necessary prior to implementing inclusive practices.

School Readiness

A school's readiness encompasses understanding teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions toward inclusion, as well as ensuring the availability of adequate school resources (e.g., finances, space, and academic materials) to support inclusive practice. Teacher disposition (i.e., the tendency for a teacher to behave in a specific manner based on a belief system; Villegas, 2007), as well as the school's climate towards inclusive curriculum impact a teacher's ability to facilitate inclusive practice (Idol, 2006). Garmon (2005) listed the following dispositions as requirements for success in an inclusive classroom. Open-mindedness necessitates an individual to be receptive to new information and experiences. Self-awareness through reflection requires one to be critical of his/her own teaching and make appropriate changes consistent with the principles of teaching and learning. Furthermore, educators committed to social justice attempt to achieve equity for all students. Schools comprised of educators who are dispositionally aligned with these characteristics create an inclusive climate conducive to supporting all learners.

Establishing a task force to evaluate the school's readiness for inclusion can be beneficial (Keenan, 1997). Visionary leaders who want to be change agents recognize that transformation requires ongoing consensus building (Villa & Thousand, 2003), and the task force can assist with this process. Task force meetings allow for discussions among school administrators, teachers, parents, and community members. Stakeholders would, therefore, have the time and opportunity to discuss and plan for identified concerns.

Needs Assessment

In addition to a readiness assessment exploring attitudes, dispositions, and school climate, an assessment of academic resources and service needs is also necessary to understand how best to meet the needs of all students in the school. Multiple instruments are available for measuring the quality indicators of inclusive schools found within the public sector, e.g., the Program Quality Measurement Tool (Cushing et al., 2009) and the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education—Quality Indicators for Inclusive Building Based Practices (2011). These tools explore structures and practices that support inclusive education. Practices such as collaboration and planning, evidence-based instructional strategies, curricula, and individualized supports are evaluated to determine the level of need (Cushing et al., 2009). Through the collaborative effort of these processes, a well-developed plan for inclusion of students with disabilities can be created and communicated to the broader Catholic community. Currently, no validated measures exist for the unique Catholic context.

School Resources and Frameworks

Having sufficient resources at the school level is critical to successful implementation of inclusive education. Funding, time for collaboration, and evidence-based frameworks enable educators to feel prepared and supported, which is essential to success. The following recommendations are proposed to ensure sufficient school resources.

Financial Support/Funding

In the 2005 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) statement *Renewing our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium*, the Bishops reiterated their nearly three-decades-old call for Catholic schools to increase their support of students with disabilities in schools. However, funding remains a challenge for most Catholic schools. Although Catholic schools receive a small portion of federal funding, it is not sufficient to support these practices.

It would be understandable for a Catholic school leader to focus on the inequality between public and private school funding and determine that insufficient funds were available for his or her school to provide services to SWDs. However, a lack of funding need not be a deterrent to inclusion and/or a reason to exclude students with disabilities from Catholic schools. Through visionary leadership utilizing creative funding, empirically validated frameworks, and evidence-based practices, schools can maximize funding and progress towards providing an inclusive learning environment for all Catholic school students.

Over the years, a number of stakeholders have worked together to create nonprofit foundations to support inclusive efforts of (Arch)diocesan Catholic schools. They have a common mission of providing funds to expand special education services and resources in Catholic schools while allowing for site-based decision-making, thus honoring the principle of subsidiary in the Catholic Church as previously noted. Additionally, these foundations promote increased awareness of the need for inclusive Catholic education and community building.

Examples of the nonprofits designed to support inclusion include Catholic Coalition for Special Education (CCSE) in Washington, DC; Enriching Many By Reaching All in Catholic Education (EMBRACE) in the Archdiocese of Kansas City-Kansas; Foundation for Inclusive Religious Education (FIRE) in the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph; and One Classroom in the Archdiocese of St. Louis. The resources and support these nonprofit foundations offer can provide the needed incentive for a Catholic school to begin serving SWDs or to expand existing services.

Advocacy

Advocacy for inclusion is critical for changing culture and implementing change. It is not uncommon for parents of children with disabilities to feel like they must become personal

advocates. Like all parents, they want to obtain the services and placements that best meet the needs of their child. Unfortunately, parents of SWDs may be put in adversarial positions where they feel they must battle for services and placement (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). Such adversarial feelings can be intensified when families are seeking a Catholic education for their child given the disparities between services in public and parochial schools.

As Catholics, we believe parents are the primary educators of their children and are responsible for choosing a school that will best meet their child's needs (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2010). The unique mission of Catholic schools is to support parents in the formation of their child, both spiritually and intellectually. Parents of students with disabilities desperately desire for their child to have the opportunity to fully participate in a Catholic school environment. The Catholic school provides the opportunity for children to participate in their faith daily, prepare for their sacraments, and go to school with their siblings.

In Catholic schools, just as in public schools, parents are important educational partners. Developing a positive relationship between the school and parents results in increased parental participation in the child's education (Staples & Diliberto, 2010). Parents want—and deserve—access to information, support for their decisions, and provision of appropriate services (Grove & Fisher, 1999). When implementing the proper frameworks and instructional practices, our schools will be positioned to support parents who desire an inclusive Catholic education for their child.

Advocacy efforts are not limited to parents. A variety of national organizations help advocate for inclusion specifically in Catholic schools. While the following is not an exhaustive list of advocacy organizations, the organizations listed specifically target inclusion in Catholic schools and can provide resources and support to parents, teachers, and administrators.

The National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) was founded in 1982. NCPD's mission is to affirm the dignity of every person and to work collaboratively to ensure meaningful participation in all aspects of the life of the Church and society (NCPD, 2020). In addition, the National Catholic Board on Full Inclusion (NCBoFI) has a vision of full inclusion in Catholic schools for SWDs. To achieve this vision, the NCBoFI connects schools, families, and teachers who are currently including SWDs with schools and families hoping to begin an inclusive program in their parish school. In addition, NCBoFI disseminates current research and provides mentorship during implementation (NCBoFI, 2020). Finally, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) monitors and advocates for issues related to education in Catholic schools, including the topic of inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools (USCCB, 2019).

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (RTI and PBIS)⁵

Students with diverse learning needs should have full access to the range of learning experiences and environments available to other students while also feeling welcomed in those students' social networks (Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2017). A multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) is an integrated framework that addresses the academic and behavioral needs of students that includes both RtI and PBIS. Historically, Response to Intervention (RtI) has addressed academics, whereas Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) focused on behavior. However, they have five elements in common that have been incorporated into MTSS: (a) multiple tiers, (b) universal screening, (c) a continuum of evidence-based interventions, (d) continuous progress monitoring and data-based decision-making through problem solving, and (e) implementation fidelity (Fox et al., 2010).

RtI is a three-tiered instructional framework using data to systematically guide evidence-based instruction and intervention. RtI ensures all students have access to the grade-level curriculum regardless of their ability. The greater the student's need, the more intensive the intervention and monitoring provided. PBIS—a behavioral framework—was designed to promote a positive school climate and to reduce behavioral issues. PBIS encourages positive behavior for all students through proactive and preventive strategies (i.e., teaching expected, appropriate social skills that support academic progress [Sailor et al., 2009]). It emphasizes guidance rather than punitive disciplinary strategies to change behavioral patterns. Schools implementing PBIS with fidelity typically experience decreases in office discipline referrals (ODR), suspensions, and expulsions (Simonsen et al., 2008). Further, schools implementing PBIS are friendlier, more positive and have a more collaborative work environment among teachers than non-PBIS schools (Bradshaw et al., 2008). Given the parallel development and shared similarities between RtI and PBIS, approaching the framework with an integrated approach (i.e., MTSS) can avoid a silo approach and be more efficient with resources, leading to sustainability (Mcintosh et al., 2009).

MTSS is an evidence-based framework with proven practices. Therefore, it can be effective in Catholic schools. However, MTSS requires an intentional, long-term (3-5 years) commitment to ensure effective implementation with fidelity to successfully meet the needs of diverse learners (S. L. Hall, 2008).⁶

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for instruction organized across three principles based on the learning sciences: (a) multiple means of representation, (b) multiple means of expression, and (c) multiple means of engagement. The UDL principles map onto three brain

⁵ RtI = Response to Intervention; PBIS = Positive Behavior Intervention Supports. Acronyms are further defined in the upcoming text.

⁶ For a comprehensive description of MTSS, refer to the Faggella-Luby and Bonfiglio article in this special issue.

networks—recognition, strategic, and affective—that play a primary role in learning (T. E. Hall et al., 2012). According to T. E. Hall et al. (2012), representation (recognition) allows for flexible methods to present content; expression (strategic) allows for flexible ways for students to show what they know; and engagement (affective) allows for flexible options for generating and sustaining motivation.

Learning varies across individuals. Learners differ in what they learn, why they learn, and how they learn Coyne et al. (2006). UDL principles enable us to recognize the variability of student learning as the norm, not an exception (T. E. Hall et al., 2012). Thus, the goal of UDL is to remove students' barriers and provide access to content utilizing these principles across the whole curriculum (Cunningham et al., 2017). Curriculum has four essential components—goals, materials, methods, and assessments. Planning with UDL ensures that (a) firm goals are established for students; (b) high expectations for achievement are maintained; (c) unnecessary barriers to learning are identified and removed; and (d) appropriate learning supports/accommodations are present (Zabala, 2016). Such intentionality of planning provides for the inclusion of students with disabilities and helps ensure their success.

While teachers report that UDL takes more time during the planning phase, it allows them to better facilitate the lesson and support students during learning. In addition, when teachers utilize similar pedagogical practices, collaboration among educators increases (Cunningham et al., 2017). Given that UDL allows students with a variety of needs to access the general curriculum, it is a framework worth considering when implementing inclusion.

High-Leverage Practices (HLPs) and Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs)

In 2014, the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children (TED-CEC) through the CEEDAR Center at the University of Florida began working to compile high-leverage practices (HLPs). HLPs are evidence-based practices that support students who struggle given their learning and behavioral challenges (CEEDAR Center, n.d.). HLPs are organized by four aspects of practice, including, (a) collaboration, (b) assessment, (c) social/emotional/behavioral practices, and (d) instruction (CEEDAR Center, n.d.). While HLPs are identified for special education, they are appropriate for all teachers across all settings, content areas, and grade levels, and have been found to have a positive impact on student performance (McCray et al., 2017). Table 2 provides a detailed list of the 22 validated high-leverage practices.

Evidence based practices (EBPs) are effective instructional strategies validated in the research (B. G. Cook et al., 2008; McCray et al., 2017; Odom et al., 2005). They are appropriate for a variety of developmental levels and are often content-focused (McCray et al., 2017). EBPs improve student achievement and increase the ability of students, including students who are at risk for failure, to meet performance standards. EBPs should be the first option of

Table 2
High-Leverage Practices (HLPs) From the CEEDAR Center

Aspect of Practice	HLP
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate with professional to increase student success • Organize and facilitate effective meetings with professionals and families • Collaborate with families to support student learning and secure needed services
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use multiple sources of information to develop a comprehensive understanding of a student's strengths and needs • Interpret and communicate assessment information with stakeholders to collaboratively design and implement educational programs • Use student assessment, analyze instructional practices, and make necessary adjustments that improve student outcomes
Social/Emotional and Behavioral Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment • Provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students' learning and behavior • Teach social behaviors • Conduct functional behavioral assessments to develop individual student behavior support plans
Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and prioritize long- and short-term learning goals • Systematically design instruction toward a specific goal • Adapt curriculum tasks and materials for specific learning goals • Teach cognitive and metacognitive strategies to support learning independence • Provide scaffolded supports • Use explicit instruction • Use flexible grouping • Use strategies to promote active student engagement • Use assistive and instructional technologies • Provide intensive instruction • Teach students to maintain and generalize new learning across time and settings • Provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students' learning and behavior

Note. Adapted from "High-Leverage Practices and Evidence-Based Practices: A Promising Pair," by E. D. McCray, M. Kamman, M. T. Brownell, and S. Robinson, 2017, CEEDAR Center and U.S. Department of Education.

implementation. If carried out with fidelity, they provide the highest likelihood of improving student outcomes (B. G. Cook et al., 2008). For more information on EBPs, visit Innovation Configuration at the CEEDAR Center—University of Florida (<http://cedar.education.ufl.edu/tools/innovation-configurations/>).

High-leverage practices and evidence-based practices are complementary, and when combined, they increase both the intensity of the intervention and the support provided to students. HLPs are used to teach specific EBPs in content areas. The coupling of them can be quite powerful in providing increasingly intensive instruction/intervention for struggling learners and students with disabilities (McCray et al., 2017).

Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring is a strategy designed to support students with disabilities in the classroom by providing increased access to the curriculum while enhancing social interactions with peers (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2017). It offers a practical approach to assisting SWDs in the general education classroom, as students are paired and assist one another during instruction (Carter & Kennedy, 2006).

Carter & Kennedy (2006) identified four core components of an effective peer mentoring program: (a) student selection, (b) peer training, (c) peer-delivered support, and (d) adult monitoring. Peer mentoring has been associated with higher levels of student engagement, increased social interactions, reduction in problem behaviors, and improved academic performance Mastropieri et al. (2006).

Professional Knowledge and Skills

Cultural readiness and implementation of structures and frameworks are necessary for inclusion. In addition to these foundational requisites, educators need knowledge of and skill in implementing inclusive practices. While teachers may support the concept and practice of inclusion, studies indicate that too often they are not provided enough professional development to support and sustain its implementation (Crowley & Wall, 2007; Durow, 2007; Kern, 2016). Helping teachers and administrators embrace and implement new strategies requires providing them with specialized training and support to create a sustainable model of inclusion (Nishimura, 2014). In addition, they need time to deepen their understanding of instructional practices, evaluate student work, and analyze data (Guskey, 2003).

Professional development (PD) can take multiple forms, each with its own benefits. The ultimate goal of PD regardless of its specific form, is to improve student learning outcomes (Guskey, 2003). Preparing educators who are well versed in populations with diverse learning needs and the evidence-based practices commensurate with SWDs is critical to improving student outcomes.

Each building would benefit from at least one licensed expert teacher/leader who can facilitate inclusive education and disseminate information. In addition, all educators within a school need foundational training in the aforementioned frameworks and evidence-based practices to support all learners. This training may occur onsite, online, at workshops, and/or through virtual training (Trump & Hange, 1996). Nishimura (2014) detailed the characteristics of effective PD as follows. Effective PD is (a) individualized and school-based, (b) utilizes coaching and other follow-up procedures, (c) engages in collaboration, and (d) embeds practices into the daily lives of teachers.

Providing teachers with training and tools is key to ensuring the success of inclusion. As teacher knowledge increases, so does positive teacher attitudes toward inclusion (Royster et al., 2014). PD is available by national experts in both public and private domains. In addition, inclusion in Catholic schools has recently become a targeted mission of several institutions of higher education (e.g., University of Notre Dame, Loyola University-Chicago, Loyola Marymount and others). Collaboration with these national researchers can facilitate implementation of best practice through the unique Catholic context.

Inclusion in a Catholic School: An Example

Inclusion in Catholic schools is a fairly new initiative despite longstanding advocacy and our call to serve students with disabilities. However, examples of successful inclusion may be found in many schools and dioceses across the country—both preschool-8th grade (P-8) and secondary. The following serves as a P-8 example. For a secondary-level example, please refer to the Smith and Cheatham article in this special issue.

Most Pure Heart of Mary Catholic School

Most Pure Heart of Mary (MPHM) Catholic School is located in Topeka, Kansas. Enrollment for the 2019-20 school year is 356 students in kindergarten through 8th grade. Approximately 17% of the students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, and 6% are identified as English Language Learners. There are 24 teachers in the school, including a licensed special education teacher. Currently, 31 students (9%) have an IEP through the local education agency (LEA) of Topeka Public Schools. Students with IEPs qualify under IDEA with the following disabilities: specific learning disability, speech-language impairment, autism, visual impairment, orthopedic impairment, and other health impairment. While 9% of the Most Pure Heart of Mary student population is identified as having a disability, many non-identified students struggle but do not qualify for services under IDEA. These non-identified students include those with attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and students who experience anxiety, depression, and other conditions that can interfere with learning.

MPHM Catholic School's mission statement addresses inclusion—"Our Most Pure Heart of Mary School community believes that each student is a child of God. Students, teachers, and families

are dedicated to growing in the fullness of our Catholic faith, helping all learners achieve academic success, and strengthening our personal relationships with Jesus.” Key to the school’s mission of inclusion is the idea that every child is a child of God and can achieve academic success. Given this, the teachers and staff are committed to helping each child maximize his or her God-given potential.

History of SWDs at MPHM

Since the early 1990s, Most Pure Heart of Mary has served SWDs. An individual teacher with a passion for serving students with disabilities initially spearheaded these efforts. The special education program, created and known as the Academic Resource Center (ARC), was designed as a pullout model to support SWDs. The ARC was housed in an adjacent building, and eligible students left the school and crossed the parking lot to another building, where they received services.

In 2004, the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas conducted a self-created needs analysis of all the Catholic schools in the Topeka region. It sought to comprehensively examine how SWDs were being served by the Catholic Schools in Topeka and to identify the specific needs of teachers and administrators serving them. As a result of the needs analysis, schools developed Student Improvement Teams (SITs) to implement the problem-solving process, providing focused, research-based intervention to students who were struggling academically or behaviorally. In addition, schools built a collaborative relationship with the LEA to facilitate the referral process for special education evaluation. Finally, schools accessed professional development related to disability-specific topics and interventions.

Evolution of Inclusion

Most Pure Heart of Mary continued the ARC model of service delivery until 2007 when the state of Kansas and the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas began adopting MTSS as an instructional framework to meet the needs of all students. The Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas asked all schools to bring their SITs to a two-day training on MTSS facilitated by a Kansas State Department of Education trainer, who covered topics such as structuring, leadership, implementation, and evaluation. Based on the MTSS training, the staff at MPHM began considering the changes required to move from the ARC model to the systematic framework of MTSS to address the needs of all students.

Changing models proved to be a difficult transition. The teacher who founded the ARC program was invested in the pullout model of support, and the teachers were accustomed to turning over their responsibility for students to the ARC. Therefore, one of the first steps for MPHM was creating a culture of inclusion and responsibility. Challenging, ongoing conversations among faculty, administrators, and stakeholders occurred. Although MPHM had already established a practice to include SWDs, the vision of inclusion had to be expanded to better align with current best practice

and the newly developed core beliefs regarding inclusion established by the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas. These core beliefs are (a) All God's children can learn and achieve at high standards. (b) Learning includes spiritual, academic, and social competencies. (c) All members of the Catholic education community are called to learn, grow, and reflect. (d) Every leader, at all levels, is called to support every student. (e) Change is intentional, coherent, and dynamic because we are called to our vocation as Catholic school educators.

The 2010-11 school year proved to be a turning point for MPHM for the transition from a pullout service delivery model to implementing a framework for MTSS. A new principal began his tenure, and one of his first initiatives was to move the ARC into the school building. By doing so, he sent a clear message to all stakeholders that these students were part of the school. In addition, he made clear an expectation of collaboration between classroom teachers and the ARC teacher to provide support to the students in the classroom throughout the school day.

Since 2010-2011, MPHM's administrators and staff have worked together to create a school-wide assessment plan for both reading and math utilizing validated pieces of evidence. Based on assessment data, evidence-based decisions are made, and students are provided appropriate intervention and support. Research-based interventions in math and a multisensory reading program are used to provide powerful instruction to students. The school schedule also has been adjusted by administration to allow time across grade levels to provide tiered support to students based on their needs as identified through data. In addition, more recently, grade level collaboration time has been built into the school schedule along with SIT meetings. This ensures that faculty and staff have convenient times to discuss student progress and needs. Most important, the teachers are implementing many of the HLPs identified by the CEEDAR Center (McLesky & Brownell, 2015).

The use of HLPs and MTSS has resulted in a decrease in the number of students being referred to the LEA for a special education evaluation and an increase in the number of students demonstrating skills "on grade level." Further, due to the implementation of an MTSS framework, SWDs are spending most of their time in the general classroom rather than utilizing a pullout model of providing intervention in a resource room setting (E. White, personal communication, October 31, 2019).

Future Considerations

The Most Pure Heart of Mary example illustrates successful inclusion with the implementation of instructional frameworks and HLPs. However, it also illustrates that inclusion takes time...good things take time! MPHM has been working on its model for many years, and faculty and staff consider inclusion a work in progress. Given this, future considerations include an increase in intervention time in grades 6-8; identification and expansion of research-based interventions; exploration of supports for students with mental health and behavioral issues; and revision of the PBIS (E. White, personal communication, October 31, 2019).

Final Reflection

While our faith calls us to serve all God's children, it can feel like a daunting task. Great effort is being made to increase inclusive practice in Catholic schools, yet much work remains to successfully change school culture and provide the necessary elements to prepare the schools to meet the needs of all students. Recent studies indicate that more schools (i.e., 7% to 11.5%) are embracing the mission of inclusion (Bonfiglio et al., 2019). However, schools are in need of supplementary resources and professional development related to inclusive practice (e.g., Boyle & Hernandez, 2016). This article outlines validated frameworks and evidence-based practices that support diverse learning needs across the parochial setting and can support the Catholic school from an inception of inclusion to implementation. The example of a midwestern Catholic school demonstrates that when these frameworks and practices are implemented with fidelity, despite limited resources, students with diverse learning needs can be successful in the Catholic school setting.

Catholic schools can and must answer the call of our mission to serve inclusively and embrace a climate of support and mutual ownership for meeting the needs of all learners. Schools must have access to resources and seek out available supports for implementation while also recognizing that lack of funding need not be an absolute barrier to greater inclusive practice. Educators must acquire the knowledge and skills to address the diversity in their classrooms. By doing so, we not only help parents fulfill their dreams for their children, we also fulfill our mandate from Scripture – “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14).

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