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Inclusion in Catholic Schools: An Introduction to the Special Issue

Christine M. Bonfiglio¹, Michael J. Boyle², Michael N. Faggella-Luby³ and Sean J. Smith⁴

ALL children have God-given potential and human dignity, for they are made in His image. Catholic teachings are clear about this assertion, and they implore us to reach out to the margins and open our Catholic school doors so every child has a seat at the table. We see this call to serve in scripture, as Jesus embraces all people—welcoming and building community with those on the margins; in Catholic social teaching—affording all people the right to participate in community...reaching the full burgeoning to their fullest potential; and in Church documents—supporting inclusion of people with disabilities, immigrants, and the poor.

Although we are dutifully called, students with disabilities (SWD) are underserved in Catholic education. Only approximately 1% of the nation's SWD population (67,000 students) attend private schools with 40% identified as Catholic (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Despite the small number, SWD and peers that struggle are attending our schools and therefore, must be included meaningfully and served successfully. Moreover, Catholic educators experience students with learning differences absent of diagnoses, learning in academically diverse classrooms every day.

Consequently, this special issue of the *Journal of Catholic Education* is dedicated to exploring issues surrounding inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools and grounded in

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relevant theological, moral, and practical considerations for educators. Each of the following seven articles stands solidly on its own merit. However, we have made a concerted effort to impose a thematic structure and sequential flow for the reader. The special issue therefore, is organized across three main foci—Why include?, What is inclusion?, and How do we include? in Catholic schools. Each focus includes multiple articles, supplemented with a corresponding response from the field. This partnering of research and praxis provides the reader with a theoretical foundation and the practicality of application.

Two articles address why we should meaningfully include SWD in Catholic schools. Using several Church documents, Boyle’s article, *To Act with Justice and Love Tenderly: Exploring the Church’s Call for Inclusion* offers a case for implementing inclusionary approaches in Catholic schools. Boyle argues that inclusion in Catholic schools helps to further the tenet of Christian anthropology of the person, embracing the idea that everyone is “unique and unrepeatable.” Additionally, Faggella-Luby and Engel in their article, *Why Inclusion Isn’t Coming, It Is Already Here: Catholic Schools and Inclusive Education* confirm Catholic Social Teaching as a foundation for ongoing inclusive practices in Catholic school, as well as provide a deep exploration of key disability related definitions and terms to inform educators on the journey to implement inclusion models. It concludes by debunking five common misperceptions about inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools

The following three articles define what inclusion is (i.e., what it looks like) in Catholic schools. In the article *Defining Inclusionary Practices in Catholic Schools*, Smith, Cheatham, and Amilivia define inclusion in Catholic education and offer a rationale for the need to include all learners in our Catholic schools. It outlines characteristics of high quality, inclusive schools and offers readers a review of relevant research on inclusion that is applicable to the needs of our Catholic school environments. Faggella-Luby and Bonfiglio provide a critical overview of the models of service delivery receiving national attention that might fit well in Catholic schools in their article, *A Framework for All: Building Capacity for Service Delivery in Catholic Schools*. The article frames academic and behavior supports with clear explanation of research-based components and an illustration specific to Catholic schools. Smith, Cheatham, and Mosher offer a review of effective practices in *Evidence-Based Practices to Promote Inclusion in Catholic Schools*. In this article, the authors show how evidence-based practices (EBPs) provide Catholic educators with the needed support and strategies to help ensure the successful inclusion of students with disabilities, if not all students in Catholic schools.

The special issue concludes with two final articles, which focus on how we include SWD in Catholic schools. Bonfiglio and Kroh outline *Inclusion in Catholic Schools: From Inception to Implementation*. The article provides a synthesized look at envisioning and making inclusion possible in Catholic schools by addressing historic barriers. A case scenario is provided to illustrate

how inclusion is possible in our unique context. Finally, we approach successful inclusion from the lens of the Church. Carter authentically describes an ideal inclusive faith community in *The Absence of Asterisks: The Inclusive Church and Children With Disabilities*. Collaboration with, and support from the Church without exclusionary exceptions further epitomizes meaningful inclusion in Catholic schools.

In presenting these articles, we seek to foster a conversation to better understand the inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools. Whether you are reading them to stimulate your own thinking or as a professional learning community, we invite you to this conversation. As Guest Editors for the Special Issue, we commend it to our readers and hope it will be pivotal in the mission towards inclusion in Catholic schools. Catholic teaching obligates us to be places of belonging for ALL individuals. Thus, we charge Catholic educators to open their hearts and minds, to commit to serving every child, and to intentionally live out our Catholic rhetoric of ALL are welcome!

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Christine M. Bonfiglio, Ph.D., serves as the Director for both the Office of Professional Standards and Graduate Studies and the Program for Inclusive Education in the Alliance for Catholic Education. She is a faculty member within the Institute for Educational Initiatives, teaching for PIE and ACE Teaching Fellows. With a background in Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and academic and behavioral interventions, she works to collaborate with Catholic schools in supporting all students inclusively.

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