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Evidence-Based Best Practices: The Hidden Treasure to a More Inclusive Catholic Classroom

Beth Foraker¹

Walk into most Catholic schools (pre- and post COVID-19) these days and they look very similar to the Catholic schools from 50 years ago. The tradition, the familiarity, and the similarity are comforting and classic. However, in the past 50 years a revolution has happened in education. Educational research across many domains has revealed ways to use specific teaching techniques that can help the most marginalized students succeed, while supporting the learning of all students.

Despite the advancements, society often structures supports and services for individuals with disabilities separate from the typical environment. In schools, we look to special educators rather than general education colleagues to direct and facilitate instruction for students with disabilities. As Smith and his colleagues illustrate, there are a number of proven practices (often referred to as evidence-based practices [EBPs]) that are effective in meeting the needs of ALL students, which should not be limited to certain professionals. Moreover, these practices are equally effective in the Catholic school environment.

This article spotlights EBPs that lead to successful inclusion when implemented by every Catholic educator. This effort requires that we all come together to serve the parish and/or school to improve the inclusion of students with disabilities through effective practice. It is simply a continuation of our ongoing efforts as Catholic educators. As this special issue emphasizes, inclusion of ALL students in our P-12 Catholic schools is not only possible, it should be a reality; and implementing EBPs is an important component.

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As a teacher of teachers, the mother of four children—one who has Down syndrome, and the founder of the National Catholic Board on Full Inclusion, I have visited a lot of classrooms and know these techniques (EBPs) can and will change the landscape for all students. The National Catholic Board on Full Inclusion is an independent, nonprofit organization with a mission to inspire and support Catholic schools in the process of inclusion for all children, particularly those with disabilities. Understanding that inclusion will only be possible through the efforts of teachers, parents, parishes, and the clergy, our efforts seek to provide educational research and real life experiences that support inclusive learning opportunities. To this end, we have worked with a variety of Catholic schools, the National Catholic Education Association, and other entities to foster inclusive education. Through holding national or regional conferences, connecting Catholic educators and leaders at the forefront of inclusive efforts, informing parents and families on what is possible, or simply spreading the word through social media, the National Catholic Board on Full Inclusion works to ensure that not only all are welcome, but that all are educated.

Here's the good news. There are many Catholic schools that fully include students with disabilities successfully. Some have intentionally worked to employ professional development with a focus on EBPs for their teachers. Others have created programs unique to the needs of their school and found those to be successful.

Smith and colleagues advance several of these evidence-based practices. For example, in the early grades, Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) allows one student at a higher reading level to coach another during reading activities to increase reading comprehension. CSR or Collaborative Strategic Reading is used at the upper elementary or middle school to implement peer-mediated instruction. Both EBPs rely on the partnership between peers, which is at the forefront of successful inclusionary practices in many Catholic schools.

In San Diego, California, there is an excellent peer mentor program at St. James Academy, a K-8 campus. The principal, Christine Lang, watched the peer mentor program thrive at their local high school (Cathedral Catholic High School) and took the natural next step for her students, creating a peer mentor program for younger students. Peer mentoring has been established in many Catholic high schools across the country and Ms. Lang wondered if it would be successful in the P-8 environment. The short answer is...yes! Moreover, three years into the program, the students who have graduated from St. James and now attend Cathedral Catholic are some of the biggest proponents of inclusion. Everyone involved is transformed by the opportunity to build community, be of service, and see the inherent dignity and value of every person. The academic gains of both peer mentors and mentees are without mention, beneficial.

Peer mentoring is a form of mentoring that takes place in the school environment between two students. While it comes in a variety of forms, it is often between an older or more experienced student and a new student. For example, at the high school level, an incoming freshman or a

transfer student would be paired with an upper classman. The peer shows the student around, explains the expectations and the culture of the school, and serves as a support while the new student adapts to the new setting.

In efforts to include students with disabilities, peer mentoring comprises many of these same components. And yet, facilitating inclusion is a bit different. First, the mentor is often a typically developing student who is paired with a student with a disability. The mentor's role is to support, guide, model, and facilitate the mentee's overall learning. Due to the needs of the mentee with a disability, the peer mentor often takes on additional responsibilities. A mentor might be asked to serve as a tutor, an aide, a model for social skills and behavior, and/or be available during the mentee's instruction to step in and support the mentee. Similarly, the mentor might assist with the mentee's organization and study skills, direct movement between classes, and guide the mentee throughout the academic day. Actually, the needs of the mentee might necessitate several peer mentors working with a single mentee, which are organized across the school day (e.g., one mentor in first period, another in third, and still another in sixth period). The needs of the mentee often dictate the level and intensity of support provided. Given the individualized roles and responsibilities, peer mentoring in Catholic schools is working!

The authors share additional key EBPs to promote success with executive functioning and social emotional learning—critical supports given the increased numbers of students who struggle with mental health (e.g., anxiety) in every classroom. Creating a sense of belonging for all students means giving students the tools that will support them during their struggles. Identifying and intentionally teaching the executive functioning skills needed to be successful helps all students. Executive functioning also allows students to grow in awareness of the supports that work, allowing students to be better organized and self regulate.

Executive functioning CAN be taught. Technology, visual supports, application checklists, digital calendars, and alerts to support a student are available. Again, peer mentors can be quite helpful. They can create social stories or videos to model the expected behaviors. These videos and social stories can ease anxiety, create a sense of predictability, and help the mentee to develop a set of personal tools that work too.

Smith and colleagues provide valuable evidence-based practices, which are key to successful inclusion. Therefore, the next time you walk into a Catholic school, go on a treasure hunt for these sweet techniques proven to boost learning. If you see peer mentors, video modeling, social stories, or organizational skills that have been specifically taught, you will know that this school prioritizes student learning and works to create a community for ALL learners. This is the Catholic school that is the model for the next 50 years.