

Promoting Inclusive Classrooms: The Mutuality of Interests Between Professional Development School Partners

Judy Doktor
Educational Consultant

ABSTRACT: This article examines the mutuality of interests between partners in a professional development school (PDS), with an emphasis on promoting inclusive classrooms and integrating special education students into the general education continuum. It highlights how delivery models that hinder inclusive practices stunt the growth of PDS partnerships. It is therefore in the best interest of all PDS partnerships to expand the membership of PDS participants. Suggestions include encouraging special educators and related service personnel's active engagement in PDS activities and training teacher candidates in inclusive classrooms.

Professional development schools (PDSs) are an essential component of teacher training and are at the forefront of educational scholarship. They foster collaboration between practitioners and researchers in the areas of scholarship, school improvement, and teacher training. Theoretically, new concepts or theories are discussed and revised within the university setting before being field-tested or implemented in the K–12 setting. By virtue of their training and scholarship, university educators can be of great assistance to K–12 educators in interpreting and implementing new rules and regulations promulgated by federal, state, and local mandates (National Association for Professional Development Schools, 2008). Likewise, school personnel provide support in training teachers, and they serve the research and design process by identifying areas of improvement for future study. Therefore, it is imperative that all personnel assigned to PDSs be dedicated to educational innovations and best practices to engage in the successful, ongoing, and reciprocal relationships that reflect the cooperative learning inherent in PDSs.

It is equally important that these partnerships align their pedagogy to meet the academic needs of students, including diverse learners, owing to legal mandates for individualized educational plans (IEPs). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, in concert with the recent revisions to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, changed policies and so represents what is described here as a paradigm shift. Both federal programs address the goal of providing free and appropriate education to all children, including individualized support to general education students who may require specialized assistance to demonstrate adequate annual progress (Handler, 2006).

This emphasis replaces the earlier paradigm, which presumed that the needs of students who require special education services are mutually exclusive with the needs of general education students. If one agrees with the earlier paradigm, it follows that special educators are exclusively responsible for the curriculum design and implementation of the exceptional learner's instructional plan. Rather, these legislative actions seek

to improve education through a partnership with shared responsibility between the general educators and the special educators. The new paradigm places additional responsibility on the general educator to provide a curriculum that enables all children to learn within the general education setting (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). General educators who graduate from most teacher training programs usually lack the specialized coursework and teaching experience needed to serve all students, including those with special needs (Voltz, 2001). It is therefore possible that a general education teacher may not feel competent teaching students with special needs, without advanced training in inclusion techniques and without the necessary school supervision to provide instructional support and negotiate essential collaboration with instructional teams (Bays & Crockett, 2007).

The paradigm shift provides PDS partnerships with the opportunity to create learning centers that provide essential training to preservice teachers and general educators and that serve as laboratories for inclusive education. This can be accomplished by university partners' mentoring and developing best practice techniques that allow students with special needs to remain in the general education classroom. Furthermore, university educators can assist preK–12 educators in teaching all children with special needs, whether they are identified under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 or not. In addition to providing in-service training to general educators regarding curriculum implementation, university partners can serve as catalysts for organizational change within the school or school district by modeling alternative structural arrangements, and coteaching opportunities with inclusion support teachers to provide learning opportunities that best serve all students (Lamar-Dukes & Dukes, 2005). The insights and findings of university partners can assist in providing an impetus for change at the school level.

These ideas are integrated into current PDS action plans. At the 2008 Professional Development School National Conference (Orlando, Florida), the National Association

for Professional Development Schools released a statement titled *What It Means to Be a Professional Development School*. The statement identifies the nine essentials of a PDS (Brindley, Field, & Lessen, 2008). Although all nine components are important to the success of a PDS partnership, the first and second are relevant to the promotion of inclusive practices:

1. A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community.
2. A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community.

Assigning general education teacher candidates to a practicum experience in a school must ensure that all candidates benefit from a full, rich experience at the school site that supports the PDS mission. To promote this mission, the candidate will ideally be placed in a school utilizing evidence-based best practices. Many best practices are housed under the umbrella of inclusive practices. In past educational practice, the term *inclusion* referred to educating children identified as having a disability in the general education classroom, or in other words being eligible to receive services under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. Under the new paradigm, the term *inclusion* is used in a broader context to indicate that all children, regardless of their unique circumstances, should be educated and accommodated in the general education classroom. Given the emphasis on inclusive practices in the academy, it is imperative that teacher candidates' experiences in general education classrooms be consistent with the models of inclusion, collaboration, and differential instruction taught by university partners.

Although the idea of inclusive practices originated from special education practices, best practices suggest that this method be incorporated into the instructional method

for all students with special needs (Sailor & Rogers, 2005). *Inclusive practices* generally means all children with special needs are taught in the general education classroom with additional supports. The most common support used by general educators is that of differentiated instruction, which essentially means modifying either the curriculum or the mode of instruction to meet each child's learning style (Peterson & Hittie, 2003). Differentiated instruction is not a new idea; good teachers have always tried to accommodate the learning styles of all students. If a school is not currently implementing the full range of inclusive practices, it is incumbent on the university partners to work with the school community to help establish inclusive classrooms. Inclusion and differentiated instruction must not be viewed as exclusively the domain of special education; according to best practices, the entire school community benefits from the educational and social aspects of inclusion when the general education curriculum becomes accessible and meaningful to all learners (Peterson & Hittie, 2003; Sailor & Rogers 2005; Voltz, 2001). Salend (2008) highlighted this point when he wrote, "Inclusion is not just a federal mandate, but a principled philosophy of reflective, effective teaching for individualizing the educational system for all students" (p. 7). Salend further argued that for special education teachers to model and encourage inclusive practices for general education teachers and teacher candidates, the special educator has to be a fully integrated partner in the school community—that is, an active participant on school councils, community events, and parent meetings. Following this model, the special educator is an integral part of the PDS partnership—not just in those aspects to support general education teachers but in all partnership activities.

It is therefore important to ensure that when teacher candidates are assigned to student-teaching and practicum experiences, all benefit from a full and rich experience at the school sites. Ideally, the candidates learn in a school utilizing research-based best practices. Many of these best practices advocate teaching all students in general education classrooms and

fall under the rubric of inclusive practices. As mentioned, *inclusive practices* generally means that all students with special needs are taught in the general education classroom with additional supports, and the most common support is differentiated instruction, which essentially means modifying either the curriculum or the mode of instruction to meet each child's learning style (Peterson & Hittie, 2003).

A growing concern to PDS partners is the availability of teaching staff who are able to model inclusive practices. The gap between staff availability and need is a concern among school personnel and university partners alike because inclusion moves beyond special education to include a range of youth. The expansion of services includes, but is not limited to, homeless children, immigrants, and children with socioemotional problems who do not qualify for an IEP but who can be helped under recent interpretations of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, now referred to as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Delivery Models for Special Education Services in PDS Partnerships

Despite the fact that inclusive practices and differentiated instruction are considered best practices within the academy, not much formal attention has been paid to these pedagogies in written memorandums of understanding describing PDS models and partnerships. Legal mandates and educational theories have moved the field of special education from restrictive or segregated arrangements to inclusive environments, yet barriers exist for many schools, including PDS schools, that interfere with the full implementation of inclusive education. In this section, I examine barriers to inclusive education, including administrative problems between cooperative systems and public school administration. With cooperatives, or co-ops, other models that are incorporated into professional school partnerships may serve as barriers

to full inclusion. I do not discuss delivery of special education services in nondistrict settings, such as private schools, hospital settings, and juvenile hall programs, because these settings have never been part of the standard PDS model. Rather, I discuss methods used to address the educational needs of all learners, along with barriers to full inclusion.

Special Education Cooperatives

Many in the special education academy are of the opinion that the most structural impediment to full implementation is the use of special education cooperatives. Many school districts have partnered with cooperatives to provide special education services. These cooperatives are educational entities that provide special education services for multiple school districts. The cooperative system was intended as a pool for multiple school districts to share resources and special education and related service personnel. Once special education was mandated under the original Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, many children became eligible for services. Some evidence suggests that students identified as special learners increased 151% in the 1990s alone (Frattura & Capper, 2006). As a result, school districts found it more economically feasible to hire their own special education and related service staff. Cooperatives typically maintain independent budgets, which are sustained through direct payment from school districts for services or through special education resources that are diverted from districts and directly to the special education cooperatives. Although strategically efficient, cooperatives isolate children with the most severe disabilities and with the most specialized learning needs from general education students because these services are delivered in buildings owned and operated by cooperatives with the school district.

The use of staff employed by cooperatives to deliver special educational services for school districts remains problematic in the PDS model. One consequence occurs as a result of the isolation of the cooperative education staff, who may not in turn be integrated

fully into the school culture. A review of the literature on the integration of cooperative staff and PDS partnerships did not reveal any comprehensive studies; however, the relationship between special education and PDSs has been studied (Yssel, Koch, & Merbler, 2002). The authors summarized their findings:

In summary, although special education appears to have some involvement with PDSs, it is evident, based on the findings of this study, that much more extensive participation is warranted. As more and more students with disabilities are included in general education classrooms, more demands are being placed on special education teachers to be effective collaborators. The PDS can provide a rich environment for collaborative thinking and consequently the development of skills and insights needed for future special education teachers to successfully face these challenges. (p. 144)

Yssel and colleagues (2002) found that university special education program chairpersons tended to be reluctant to engage with PDS partners, which is counterproductive to implementation of inclusion. A possible explanation for the reluctance may be that university special education faculty and special education advocates believe that the role of cooperative staff should be minimized in delivering special education services at the school site. These professionals cite multiple concerns—for instance, cooperative educators' lack of contribution to the school's mission, the minimal time that special learners are included in general education classrooms, and the lack of access to special education teachers in general education classrooms (Greenberg, 2008). Problems also lie in that special education professionals have divided loyalties when they are hired by and report to cooperatives and not the school administration.

Segregated Special Education Classrooms

Whether delivered by teachers employed by special education cooperatives or by school

districts, segregated classrooms are barriers to implementing full-inclusion best practices. Schools adhering to these models may have adequate personnel for special services—that is, guidance counselors, teachers of English as a second language, and special education teachers. However, they are considered supplemental to the general curriculum and often practice in isolation. Whereas special education personnel may be employed by the school district in this model, their role is frequently supplemental to general education.

Students also experience consequences in this delivery model. Depending on their educational needs, special learners may spend a majority of their time isolated from the general education curriculum and students. Findings indicate that these practices are neither cost effective nor effective in improving student learning outcomes (Frattura & Capper, 2006). The result of segregating special education classrooms is the ongoing marginalization of students and special educators at higher costs and student learning that lags behind inclusive education delivery models.

Special Education Classroom Setting With Limited Mainstreaming

In the special education classroom setting with limited mainstreaming, the special learner “visits” the general education classroom with no additional specialized supports. In this case, the special education staff are responsible for the total educational curriculum design and implementation, but they may have made informal agreements with the general education faculty to allow a few special education students to join the general education classroom for music, art, and assemblies. The general education teacher typically has no responsibility for the academic curriculum of the special education students, and these students are treated as “guests” in the general education classroom. Depending on the informal relationships developed between general and special education teaching staff, the general education teacher may attempt short periods of inclusive practices during the instructional

day, but this is purely up to his or her discretion and not mandatory.

Supportive Resource Model

The traditional supportive resource model involves removing special learners out of general education classrooms at various times of the day for individual or small group instruction in academic subjects taught by the special educator. The general education teacher is ideally an integral part of the IEP planning and implementation team, although special education services and monitoring of movement toward stated goals and objectives are traditionally the responsibility of the special education teacher. School staff that are open to best practices may have the resource room teachers deliver specialized services within the general education classroom (Idol, 2006); however, curriculum development and implementation for resource services remain the sole responsibility of the resource teacher.

Coteaching Model

The coteaching scenario ideally involves two certified teachers working in tandem to provide essential educational services for all learners in general education classrooms (Kloo & Zigmond, 2008). In coteaching, the special educator and the general educator deliberately plan how to assist children with IEPs to benefit from the general curriculum; they also share responsibility for enhancing the curriculum and instruction to benefit all learners. This model is currently considered a best practice because it allows extra consideration for children with special needs to learn the general curriculum with additional adult help and minimal curricular changes. Furthermore, it models differential instructional techniques for the general educational teachers. Recent changes in the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 expand the role of the special educator and allow him or her to assist other children in general education who are struggling with the curriculum, as long as he or she is also serving children with IEPs.

There are partial and full coteaching models, which are differentiated on the logistics of responsibility and the participation shared between the teaching team members. For example, the following scenario might occur in a partial coteaching model: The special education teacher makes an agreement with a first-grade teacher on an ad hoc basis to visit first graders with IEPs for 2 hours a day rather than remove the students from the first-grade classroom and deliver services in a “resource classroom.” The special educator may attempt to assist students with general education academic subjects, but there would be limited shared responsibility. In essence, the special educator would deliver the specialized services required of the IEP, with a minimum of collaboration with the general education teacher. Partial coteaching examples like these are beneficial to teacher candidates when they occur during observation. Because plans can change on a day-to-day basis (depending on the schedule of the general education teacher), teacher candidates have no guarantee of observing best practice models of instruction. In the partial coteaching model, the special educator would only assist students with IEPs.

Full Inclusion Model

In the full inclusion model, the general education teacher teaches all children in the setting. The entire school staff, including consultants, are trained in best practices for inclusive classrooms and employ these techniques to differentiate instruction. If supports for children are needed (i.e., related services, response-to-instruction programs, general tutoring, and English-language learning), they are provided within the general education classroom where the special education teachers serve in supportive roles. Special education teachers have varied roles based on the needs of the students and the general educators, including tutoring, positive behavioral support, testing, and documentation of students’ response to instructions (Lamar-Dukes & Dukes, 2005).

Teacher candidates placed in this school setting experience inclusive practices. The

professor responsible for supervising candidates’ performance is available to model best practices for both the candidate and the host teacher. The university educator can enhance the learning experience by arranging in-service presentations on topics relevant to the inclusive classroom. Arrangements are made to allow mentor teachers to use the university library and selected departmental resources. The mentor teacher and the university liaison are encouraged to work together to design, implement, and evaluate action research projects.

Suggestions to Improve Delivery of Inclusive Practices in PDS Arrangements

Time lags occur between the acceptance of new theories by the academy and their adoption and implementation into practice at the school site. By working together, the PDS partners are in the best position to move grounded theory into practice. There are, however, unique circumstances where special education teachers are not available for employment by the school district (e.g., rural communities), and staff must be obtained from the local cooperative education pool. The future of the special education cooperative appears to be certain given that, at the present time, many school districts do not have the internal organizational capacity to independently provide comprehensive special education services.

The practice of utilizing segregated special education classrooms is not in the best interest of children (Frattura & Capper, 2006). It is also harmful to professionals because it

- distances the special education teacher from the general education school culture,
- does not allow the special education teacher any voice in the decision-making process at the school site, and
- does not permit the special education teacher to be part of the PDS collabora-

orative, thus isolating him or her from the decision-making process regarding curriculum changes discussed at the school site.

Furthermore, the special education teacher does not benefit from the insights provided by the PDS professors and teacher candidates.

To help bridge this gap, university partners in the PDS collaborative can offer assistance in integrating cooperative staff with general education staff by providing in-service training for all staff working at the school. PDS contracts can include all allied service personnel and contracted professionals to take part in PDS activities. Although there may be political and organizational reasons for school districts to continue to participate in special education cooperatives, university partners must reiterate what best practices indicate—that specialized educational services should be delivered as part of the general educational curriculum. Idol (2006) suggested additional professional development support to enhance inclusion, such as strategies to support the use of cooperative learning models, as well as instructional and curriculum techniques that enhance special learners.

University partners can further advance inclusive practices both in the classroom and at the school site by incorporating best practices into the PDS memorandum of agreement. Special education teachers and related service personnel should also serve on advisory boards of PDSs, further advancing their role in the partnership.

In conclusion, the university partner can assist in transforming classrooms into inclusive learning environments by introducing and modeling scientifically validated best practices, such as differentiated instructional techniques, coteaching and collaborative teaching models, and response-to-instruction training at the school site. University partners are in a position to bridge the understanding gap between educators and policy. They can explain why federal mandates encourage the full participation of all educators and related personnel serving children in PDS activities and why

it is in the best interest of both the children and the professionals. As such, university partners can help create new programs that best meet policy goals. ^{SUP}

References

- Bays, D., & Crockett, J. (2007). Investigating instructional leadership for special education. *Exceptionality*, 15(3), 143–161.
- Brindley, R., Field, B., & Lessen, E. (2008). *What it means to be a professional development school: A statement*. Retrieved November 17, 2008, from http://www.napds.org/nine_essen.html
- Frattura, E., & Capper, C. (2006). Segregated programs versus integrated comprehensive service delivery for all learners. *Remedial and Special Education*, 27, 355–364.
- Fuchs, L., & Fuchs, D. (2007). A model for implementing responsiveness to intervention. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 39(5), 14–20.
- Greenberg, J. (2008). *Inclusion and your special education students: Who benefits?* Retrieved January 3, 2009, from <http://www.iser.com/inclusion-special-ed.html>
- Handler, B. (2006). Two acts, one goal: Meeting the shared vision of No Child Left Behind and Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. *The Clearing House*, 80(1), 5–8.
- Idol, L. (2006). Toward inclusion of special education students in general education: A program evaluation of eight schools. *Remedial and Special Education*, 27(2), 77–94.
- Kloo, A., & Zigmund, N. (2008). Coteaching revisited: Redrawing the blueprint. *Preventing School Failure*, 52(2), 12–20.
- Lamar-Dukes, P., & Dukes, C. (2005). Consider the roles and responsibilities of the inclusion support teacher. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 41(1), 55–61.
- National Association for Professional Development Schools. (2008). *What it means to be a professional development school*. Retrieved November 14, 2008, from <http://napds.org/Essentials/statement.pdf>
- Peterson, M., & Hittie, M. (2003). *Inclusive teaching: Creating effective schools for all learners*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Sailor, W., & Rogers, B. (2005). Rethinking inclusion. Schoolwide applications. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 86, 503–509.

- Salend, S. (2008). *Creating inclusive classrooms* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Voltz, D. (2001). Preparing general education teachers for inclusive settings: The role of special education teachers in the professional development school context. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 24, 288–296.
- Yssel, N., Koch, K., & Merbler, J. (2002). Professional development schools and special education: A promising partnership? *Teacher Educator*, 38(2), 141–150.



Judy Doktor, PhD, is CEO of the Roberts Group, which provides consulting and training workshops on inclusive practices and special education law. She is actively engaged with professional development school activities in several local schools. She serves as a consultant to school districts and state educational agencies on response to intervention and charter school development.