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Coffee and Collaboration: A Team Approach to Tackling Learner Challenges

Shirley Kendrick and Max Vecchiarino

The focus of this issue of *Teaching and Learning*, "Boys and Literacy," is an example of an education concern defined within the context of "authentic inclusive schooling and excellence for all" as defined by the Ontario Ministry of Education. Professionals interested in improving achievement and performance objectives related to student and school based learning and who regularly seek out opportunities to engage in group discussion and collaboration are often able to bring about change within the education environments they are employed. In the instance at hand, boys and literacy it is now more fully understood that beside planning for the host of learner contingencies that contribute to an individual learner profile, gender and socio economic influences and or differences need to be understood within the context of identifying learner challenges and needs. And that they be interpreted and represented in terms of successful classroom practices.

We (Shirley Kendrick, Vice-Principal of Special Education, and Max Vecchiarino, Coordinator of Assessment and Evaluation) meet most mornings during the school year, for coffee, conversation, and planning about how to meet the needs of learners, particularly those identified as special needs and how to forge a seamless integration between the work that is done for the general student population and the support that is provided to students with special learning needs and the staff who support them. We seek to discover:

How does a Catholic district school board of over 88,000 students (of whom 10-12% are identified with special education needs) support authentic inclusion, foster independence and promote high expectations for the achievement and learning of all students? And

How do the daily discussions between two educators foster a deeper understanding of successful practice in inclusion among colleagues to support success for all students?

In an attempt to improve the alignment of supports provided for students with special education needs the Ontario Ministry of Education published a report titled *Education For All - Supporting Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Needs K - Gr. 6*. This report is the latest in a series that spanned all grade levels, in Literacy and Mathematical Literacy and encompasses the major tenets of the earlier documents, which are based on a philosophy that values both the work of research and the wealth of practitioners' experience. It goes further by stressing that *all* teachers and classroom teachers in particular, are responsible, morally and professionally, for the learning, development, and growth of *all* the students they serve.

Education for All is based on two foundational principles: universal design for learning and differentiated instruction. The report suggests that by bringing both to bear on the work that is done in sys-

tems, schools, and classrooms, Ontario educators will be able to achieve true and meaningful inclusion – authentic to the point that the very notion of *inclusion* will cease to exist. This is precisely what some of the research on literacy and special needs is about, particularly that which focuses on boys and literacy. Research shows that girls generally learn to read earlier than boys and have more success with reading and writing early in their school lives. According to the recent Ontario Ministry of Education Guide, “Me Read – No Way,” this puts some boys at risk and should be understood within the context of what authentic inclusivity means and exactly what it means to say that all teachers will take responsibility for all students. It may also be the reason why more boys are identified as at risk than girls at an earlier age. The fact is that boys are more likely than girls to be placed in special education programs and that dropout rates are higher for boys than girls.

While researching ways and means of establishing leadership initiatives to induce change at the school level, Vecchiarino (2006) found that teachers are most collaborative when they are open to the ideas of colleagues and administrators, and when they approach their work with a willingness to learn, genuinely and authentically, about how best to support students, rather than from a perspective that would have them intervene to solve problems, through a prescribed and predetermined process. He concluded that conversations provide opportunities for professionals to engage in critical discussion, sharing individual perspectives and learning from others. Thus, team sharing and building presents a unique way of tackling the goal of achieving authentic inclusion.

This view of collaboration, however positive it may appear, is

not easy to bring about. In fact in many school systems the ideal is often talked about but seldom achieved. The reasons for this *disconnect* are multiple, and range from systemic to technical. Effective collaboration is a multi-tiered process that attempts to connect professionals from all education perspectives and contexts of education delivery.

The Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board is committed to the process of collaboration and sharing of ideas and strategies and endeavors to implement the Ministry of education’s vision and policy which is :

- to achieve the desired transformation and realize this
- vision for special education in Ontario, [where] the following critical issues must be addressed: Student Success and Access to Curriculum; Professional Development; Identification and Support Options; Service Integration; Parent Collaboration; Accountability and Reporting; Research; Special Education Funding. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p.14)

Our board is working hard toward a support and funding model that considers the level of student independence, as described in our *Independence Rubric* (Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board, 2005), with support being scaffolded to provide appropriate opportunities to foster student independence, growth, and learning as appropriate.

Accordingly, knowledge, understanding and acceptance of student success and access to the curriculum is shifting from a focus on “special,” providing limited opportunities for students with special education needs, to a focus on “education,” raising the bar and closing the learning and achievement gap for all students, through

improved accessibility to safe schools, the curriculum, and authentic learning opportunities.

Until recently, professional development was largely facilitated through a “train the trainer” model, which provided limited opportunities for sustainability. Provincially and at a district level, we are now moving to build leadership and capacity at all levels and to promote, through inquiry-based learning teams, layered supports, so that **all** staff will take responsibility for **all** students.

The focus of our work with parents is also shifting to reflect a focus on relationships and trust that will support the strengths and needs of all children as they journey through our schools. At the highest levels, inter-ministerial collaboration is moving forward with service coordination; for example, the area of transition support for students with special education needs is a critical successful practice that is attempting to provide all children and families with coordinated services at critical points of transition.

Given an emergent and transforming provincial education system, its impact on our thinking about and conversations regarding students with special education needs, in fact all students with learning challenges and their aligned supports, we reflect on what successful practice can look like at an elementary school. Tilia Cruz is principal of St. Catherine of Siena in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. Her perspective on the work that schools do, based on an informal interview, is that teachers engaged in successful practice work as a team to support **all** of the students whom they serve. Classroom and resource teachers have regular conversations about students so that programming reflects joint preparation and discussions. The hope is that teachers will come to see **all** students at St.

Catherine of Siena as their students, and not as the responsibility of one teacher or another. A student in a particular classroom is not that teacher's responsibility alone, nor is his need for intervention solely the responsibility of the resource staff at the school.

Authentic co-teaching is difficult and time-intensive but ultimately professionally rewarding and good for students: "Communication is key. It requires an alignment of many pieces. 'I do believe that difference' is not negative – it's a positive," reflects Tilia, suggesting that it is possible to build upon differences, rather than be constrained by them. She feels that Dufferin-Peel's current focus on instructional leadership is allowing school-based leaders to discern a core commitment of *her* practice, that communication requires an alignment of board, families of schools, schools, and classrooms. Effective communication at St. Catherine of Siena Elementary School is a day-to-day practice of moving toward successful and authentic inclusion through co-teaching and professional learning conversations.

At St Catherine of Siena teachers try to motivate and interest boys in reading and writing through the purchase of specific books for their library and literacy room that would be of particular interest to boys. Further, the Ministry of Education publication, "Me Read – No Way," was ordered for all teachers and PLC sessions have used that resource as a focus. This was especially important for resource teachers who were working with more boys than girls: the goal was to get those who were 'at risk' as much support in the early years as possible so that they would have stronger skills as gender became more of an issue among their peers (usually by grade 4).

Learning as much as possible about the students we serve, whether individually or from a

system perspective, requires the application of careful and thoughtful assessment strategies, so that personalized programming can take place within a layered whole that serves an entire classroom or the needs of a school or grouping of schools. This includes the very real and special needs of boys who are reluctant readers and writers. On a practical level, assessment has implications for classroom groupings and programming more generally. But what is of central importance is the willingness to understand and continuously clarify understanding of the lives of others:

We have to know about our lives, clarify our situations if we are to understand the world from our shared standpoints, ... ready to commit ourselves to small transformations as we heed the stories, the multiplex stories, as cautiously we work to transform. (Greene, 1995, p. 21)

The Ontario Human Rights Commission refers to the concept of the many dimensions of every individual as "intersectionality." If this concept is adopted and understood, we would not even have to think about deliberate inclusion, we would simply consider the needs of students as we get to understand them better and better – their many dimensions and intersections – and program accordingly.

Ultimately, from the province to our learning team of two, we are talking about relationships and about extending the power of the relationship that two educators share, in attempting to align all levels of the work that is done by teachers and administrators in classrooms, schools, and in school boards. Only by willingly learning more about one another, and earnestly attempting to respond in a meaningful and authentic way, will we as educators be able to eliminate those barriers, those la-

bels that separate and define 'otherness.'

Sadly, labels and myths are a political reality and are often a useful stepping stone to the provision of service. However we must ensure that acceptance of the need to describe and define students within the context of certain parameters does not strip away from them the rightful dignity they deserve. For instance, in the context of understanding why boys may not achieve reading and writing skills uniformly with girls, it may be true to generalize that boys are often slower to adapt to the demands of the school system and therefore the notion that boys are non-readers is somehow substantiated. Unfortunately this accepted understanding may result in the fact that boys are more often represented in the identified at risk category of students through default rather than by identification of a specific learning challenge. In terms of authentic inclusivity, the fact that we know that most boys actually do mature differently (later) should mandate an expectation on the part of education professionals that there is a need to understand how to deliver the same curriculum and its resultant expectations in a different way, thus ensuring fairness and authentic inclusivity.

Our "coffee conversations" have been intentional; striving to look within and beyond labels, to purposefully realize that each of us is made up of multiple label layers and are, therefore, at the very least, equal in our labelness and without doubt equal in the right to be treated fairly (fairness is not sameness). As do all learner challenges, the debate surrounding differences in how boys and girls learn and perform in school begs the question "in my role as a professional educator, how can I best serve my students every day they are under my care?"

Valuing professional practice with a moral purpose - Our "Top Ten Tips" for starting your own Coffee Collaboration at any level of the system:

1. Actively seek like minded individuals;
2. Make time for each other and for reflection on your conversations;
3. Value those who went before: make time for conversation with senior and experienced district staff to hear the stories of the past which will help shape your future;
4. Listen to the stories of persons "in the know" and "in the field," including, in our example, Principal Cruz, to assist with your conversations about successful practice;
5. Wherever/whenever possible, extend the relationship to include other like minded individuals and/or groups. In our example, that has included skilled researchers and a wide variety of educators;
6. Regularly consult research for successful practice and current thinking;
7. Share articles and recommended readings;
8. Challenge one another regularly!
9. Get to work early, and
10. Enjoy coffee (or other treats as appropriate)!

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The 52nd (IRA) International Reading Association Annual Convention:
Literacy Without Boundaries
will be held at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre Toronto, Ontario, Canada
May 13-17, 2007

The International Reading Association invites program proposals for its 53rd Annual Convention, to be held May 4-8, 2008, in Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

The theme of the convention will be

"Engaging Learners in Literacy"