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Abstract

This article describes inclusion as an evolutionary process in which a whole system must undergo a change. Such a process is traced in a collection of five independent schools in Vermont. **Keywords: Education, School age**

Step by Step: A System's Evolution Toward Inclusion

by Richard Schattman

The Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union (FNWSU) is a collection of five independent school districts in rural northwestern Vermont. The union's evolution from a dual system of categorical and segregated special and regular education services to a single "full inclusion" model was not an isolated change originated, directed, or orchestrated from within special education. Rather, it was a gradual cultural evolution of related community, school, and personal attitudes that took on a life of its own.

There still is, in the special education literature, controversy over the value of such inclusive educational

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practices. Some authors feel that the protection and improvement of the current dual system of regular and special education is justified; others advocate creating a single system out of the current dual systems of regular and special education. Even among those who advocate for including students with special educational needs in general education, there are few who extend the concept to students with severe and multiple needs. The value of looking at the FNWSU experience lies not in an analysis of its current practices of "full inclusion," but in an examination of how and why this union of schools changed so that all students (including those with the most significant educational, psychological, and behavioral challenges) received a quality, integrated education. The focus of this article is an examination of factors that contributed to a school system's evolution to an inclusionary model for all children and how that system's change in special education was inextricably linked to broader issues of school reform.

■ Mission vs Practice

There is little doubt that the traditions of segregated special education area programs would have persisted had FNWSU school personnel not decided to consider the notions of outcomes-based instruction. While the tenants of outcomes-based instructional models address the needs of students with varying abilities within regular education classes, the literature of outcomes-based instruction in general did not address the needs of students served within isolated special education classrooms. Although it is now clear to us that most classroom-based instructional strategies

appropriate for students without disabilities also are appropriate for students identified as "handicapped", such a strong connection had not been made in the literature of the day. Consequently, in 1982, when FNWSU schools first considered the adoption of an outcomes-based approach, they did not consider its application to populations with disabilities.

In 1983, a new FNWSU mission statement emerged from discussions among parents, teachers, administrators, board members, and civic groups. It stated:

The schools of the Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union believe that all children can learn that which is considered important for them to learn, given appropriate support, resources, and time.

Subsequent compatible mission statements were developed in each of the five districts of the FNWSU.

The FNWSU and individual school district mission statements served a number of purposes. First, they helped communities to define their purpose in terms that spoke to the needs of not just some, but all children. Second, in formulating the mission statements, professionals and community members had the opportunity to dialogue together about beliefs and possible goals. Third, the mission statements provided a "standard" with which discrete educational practices could be evaluated.

Incongruities between the mission and practice emerged and many of our practices were challenged including ability "tracking" at the secondary level and "readiness" first grades. The most striking incongruity was our practice of segregating students based on the type and severity of their disabilities or educational challenges. If we truly believed in our mission statement — that all children could learn given appropriate time and resources — how could we justify sorting out some students and sending them away to segregated area programs rather than educating them in age-appropriate classes of their neighborhood schools?

Initially, the discussions regarding our segregation practices were somewhat academic and abstract. However, the discussions became concrete as we examined the effects of segregation in relationship to the attainment of our stated "desired student outcomes" for all children, which included:

- **Outcome 1: Development of a good self concept.** As a result of participating in Franklin NW schools all students will feel competent and positive about themselves as learners. The process of education should enhance not diminish one's feeling of self worth.

- **Outcome 2: Development of appropriate social skills.** As a result of participating in Franklin NW schools all students will develop the necessary social skills which will enable them to participate fully in school, work, and home life.
- **Outcome 3: Development of higher level cognitive skills.** As a result of participating in Franklin NW schools all students will learn well, progress in the curriculum to the greatest extent possible, and learn to be independent, self-directed learners.

Through our self-examination we discovered a number of disturbing things. First we saw the children who attended the regional programs climb on the same school bus as their neighborhood peers and siblings each morning, disembark at the neighborhood school, and wait in a "special" section of the playground until the "special" bus took them away to their out-of-district program. Once on the special bus, they traveled up to 45 minutes with other children deemed appropriate for segregation to a school for the children of a community other than their own. We decided to ask children attending regional programs and their siblings how they felt about this routine. Consistently, they responded that it was diminishing, humiliating, and embarrassing. Clearly, this practice violated our first student outcome that schools should enhance children's feelings of self-worth.

A more in depth look into the regional classes revealed that some "mainstreaming" opportunities were provided for the students attending the area classes. However, they were

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minimal, and they were not with children from the students' home schools and communities. Consequently, the primary models of age-appropriate social skills for students in the regional classes were the adult special education staff and other children with disabilities in the room. Thus, FNWSU's segregation of students with disabilities effectively denied them opportunities to achieve our second desired student outcome of social skill development.

Finally, our practice of segregation was viewed in relationship to our third stated desired outcome of developing higher level cognitive skills. Special classes had the capacity to employ special techniques to teach specific skills. Unfortunately, our review of the literature led us to believe that the specialized capacity of segregated programs, in fact, had negative effects on students. Specifically, the teacher-directed instructional methods commonly employed in special classes encouraged student dependence on others (i.e. the teachers and paraprofessionals) rather than the

development of self-directed, independent learning, and higher level reasoning and problem-solving skills. This issue became alarming to us when we began to consider how the dependent relationship fostered in a segregated model might contribute to a life-long pattern of dependence.

■ Shifting Toward Inclusion

This self-examination process caused the FNWSU community to conclude that, for a group of our children with disabilities, the practices we employed clearly violated our stated mission. We were faced with three options. We could modify our philosophy and mission so it did not address *all* children, we could learn to live with and ignore the discrepancy between our values and practices, or we could change our practices. The majority of teachers, administrators, and community members who pondered this dilemma decided to initiate a planning process that hopefully would facilitate a change in practices so that students currently segregated could be educated in a manner consistent with our stated mission and philosophy.

The shift toward more inclusive educational practices within FNWSU were stimulated by the development of mission and outcome statements and changes initiated in general rather than special education (i.e., the adoption of an outcomes-based model of instruction). However, other factors facilitated the system's change, namely a) the access to knowledge and technical assistance, b) advocacy for State funding changes to support inclusive educational practices, c) our actual learning experiences in bringing children back to their home schools and classes, and d) the adoption of collaborative teaming practices among school personnel.

There have been a great number of important lessons learned as a result of having created a "fully inclusive system." The most important for me are the following three:

- **You are never really there.** While the FNWSU schools represent some of the earliest and finest examples of inclusive education, there continues to be a need for growth and improvement. It takes continued staff development, openness to and exploration of new ideas and methods, and a constant renewal of the belief that it is vitally important for all children to live and learn together.
- **Teaming is the key.** When a planning team is working well it can address virtually any issue. I have visited and studied programs throughout the United States and Canada committed to the provision of fully inclusive education, and the one common denominator is they all use teams for planning, problem solving, and program implementation. It is the configuration of a team, with its diverse representation of perspectives and multiple sources of creativity, which allows us to deal with the diversity and complexity of the needs represented in classes that include all children.

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• **System wide inclusion is very different than student-specific integration.** Many schools today are being asked by parents and others to provide integrated educational opportunities to children even though an integrated approach is not endorsed system-wide. In the FNWSU inclusion and diversity are allowed and understood as the mission of the schools, system-wide. Consequently, it is rare to hear FNWSU personnel ever talk about whether or not regular class placement is appropriate. When issues arise, as they invariably do, the focus is on solving the problem rather than challenging the appropriateness of a student's placement. System-wide versus student-specific approaches to inclusive education require a deeper commitment to the principles of inclusion. In a system committed to inclusion, students' transitions from grade to grade and school to school occur systematically and routinely; in schools where inclusive placements are a unique student-specific phenomenon transitions can be problematic. Without a broad commitment to inclusion for all students, new participants in a student's program must be brought "up to speed;" it is like starting over, year after year. Finally, a systems approach differs from an individual approach in that inclusion is a concept attached to a larger effort. When specific "innovative" practices are introduced to support the larger effort (i.e., general school reform or adoption of an outcomes based model) they are more likely to be embraced and endure.

■ Effective Schools for Everyone

North American schools are being challenged to improve and become more effective. For some, "effective" means preparing graduates to be competitive in the world economy' for others, "effective" means higher overall scores on standardized tests of achievement. People of the Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union

system chose to interpret "effective" in terms of social justice; that is, they saw that a community could only consider its schools effective if the schools were effective for everyone, including students with the most challenging needs. The very act of culling out some students (e.g., those with disabilities and labels; those who may adversely affect aggregate achievement scores) precludes a school from being eligible for consideration as effective.

The commitment of the Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union to restructure to address the diverse needs of learners emanated from the belief that the needs of each individual child justifies the allocation of additional resources, restructuring of programs, and the provision of a genuinely individualized educational plan. Certainly, the schools of FNWSU still are far from perfect; they will always have a distance to go to meet the needs of all children as well as they would like; but they are committed to that end. They recognize that programs need to change in response to children rather than having children fit into existing programs. As the schools of FNWSU experiment with more ad hoc structures, engage in ongoing staff development, and continue to involve parents as full members of planning teams, they will develop new approaches and solve new problems so that children can grow and learn together. The hope for the future is bright. As children grow and learn together, they will enter into adult life with values that speak to the importance of differences, and the nature of interdependence, support, and friendship.

An expanded version of this article, including citations, appears in R. Villa, J. Thousand, W. Stainback, & S. Stainback (eds.) (in press). Restructuring for caring and effective education: An administrative guide to creating heterogeneous schools. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes. (P.O. Box 10624, Baltimore, MD 21285-0624).

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