Advances in Schoolwide Inclusive School Reform

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Abstract
This article highlights three significant advances in schoolwide inclusive school reform and suggests three next steps to improve educational outcomes for all students, particularly for students for whom typical instruction is not effective. Significant advances are as follows: (a) a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) with embedded response to intervention, which includes positive behavioral interventions and supports; (b) universal design for learning; and (c) collaborative instruction involving general and specialized educators. Next steps are as follows: (a) implementing flexible, braided funding across educational programs; (b) fully integrating behavior and academic interventions pedagogy within MTSS; and (c) scaling up and sustaining innovative and evidence-based practices through implementation science.

Keywords
inclusion, school reform, multi-tiered system of support, universal design for learning, collaborative instruction

Schoolwide inclusion is concerned with equity among all students, including students who require language enhancements, need an accelerated curriculum, struggle with particular content, or require supports and/or services funded through Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA; P.L. 108-446). Indeed, the co-editors of this special issue chose wisely to describe the population of interest as “persons for whom typical instruction is not effective,” which can be true of any student in a particular context. Too often, we “blame the victim” by using pejorative labels for students, as if their learning problems are personal qualities rather than manifestations of their existence within various ecological contexts. “Persons for whom typical instruction is not effective” lifts the burden off students and places it on us. Furthermore, the term locates students on a continuum of effectiveness with other students, rather than as members of a class or category.

A schoolwide, equity-based definition of inclusive education provides a conceptual pathway out of class or categorical segregation in education. Artiles and Kozleski (2007) asserted,

Inclusive education work must not focus on access and participation in general education for students with disabilities, but rather on access, participation, and outcomes for students who have endured marginalization due to ethnic identity and ability level in educational systems fraught with inequitable structural and social conditions. (p. 359)

Schoolwide inclusion asks not, “What is the least restrictive place to instruct this student?” but asks, “What is the best instructional situation for this student to successfully engage the general curriculum?” This question gives a new meaning to the old inclusion slogan “All means all.”

When inclusion is defined as a matter of equitable distribution of educational resources to all students, we must confront the issue of system change. My colleagues and I use the term “school reform” to approach the extensive cultural shift that must occur in the traditionally organized school to actualize inclusive education (Burrello, Sailor, & Kleinhammer-Tramill, 2013; Sailor, 2009). The discussion of three recent advances in schoolwide inclusive school reform that follows is grounded in an equity definition of inclusion that applies to all students and is of particular relevance to those students for whom typical instruction is not effective. Out of a veritable explosion of recent advance in inclusion, I selected three practices for a brief review here: multi-tiered system of support with an embedded response to intervention (MTSS/RTI), universal design for learning (UDL), and collaborative instruction.

MTSS/RTI
A useful way to conceptualize instruction in terms of equity is to differentiate it according to measured student need, the polar opposite of “one size fits all,” the more traditional

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grade-level classroom instructional delivery model. “Multi” in this case equates to three, although additional instructional tiers are likely to emerge through research (Wixson, 2011). “Tier” refers to intensity of instruction, which can be delineated in different ways. Tier 2 interventions, for example, may be allowing more time for typical reading instruction or engaging a catalytic curriculum enhancement such as Read 180® (Scholastic, Inc., 2014). Tier 3 might involve additional after-school, one-on-one tutoring. Student progress is monitored to determine when he or she can successfully learn in Tier 1, which is typical instruction.

Confusion abounds in the literature and practice concerning the more familiar term RTI. Conceptually, RTI was imported from the field of public health into special education and became a focus of ongoing rigorous research into learning disabilities associated with reading (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003). The origins of RTI in special education, its implications for public policy, and descriptions of its use in schools are found in a landmark publication of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (2006). The broader scale concept that became MTSS emerged from the RTI construct when “the cat leapt out of the bag” of special education and ran off to general education to become a schoolwide application for all students (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2010). Some RTI researchers express concern over this broader emergence and the implications for “blurring” the definitions of special education (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010). Still others are concerned that RTI is a counter-inclusionary tactic directed at resegmenting students with disabilities (Ferri, 2012).

The earliest published uses of the term MTSS that I have been able to locate are that of Prasse et al. (2012) in an article on personnel preparation and Erickson, Noonan, and Jenson (2012) on measuring schoolwide implementation, although the term appears to have originated several years earlier in an initiative of the State of Kansas when Alexa Posny (2007) was State Commissioner. In my view, we might for now coalesce as a field around the combination term MTSS/RTI (Erickson et al., 2012; MTSS, 2013; Prasse et al., 2012), which embeds the special education multi-tiered concept within the broader systemic framework of schoolwide applications. Positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) has now become an evidence-based extension of multi-tiered pedagogy in thousands of schools nationwide (Sailor, Wolf, Choi, & Roger, 2009; Sugai & Horner, 2009; www.pbis.org).

The reason I consider MTSS/RTI to be one of the most significant advances in the area of inclusive school reform is because it enables evidence-based practices originating through research in special education to be extended to a broader class of students in a context of prevention. MTSS/RTI helps practitioners shift their focus from locating learning problems strictly within the individual to a broader concept of examining the measured needs for extra support in the context of particular environments. In this sense, pedagogy more closely aligns with the Americans with Disabilities Amended Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-325) than with the more categorical IDEA (Sailor & Burrello, 2013).

**UDL**

U.S. public education is fully immersed in the age of accountability in which test scores are a paramount indicator of student achievement. Over the course of 15 years approaching inclusive education through whole-school reform, my colleagues and I have learned that the quality of grade-level classroom instruction while, by itself, insufficient as a complete predictor of year-end test scores, is nonetheless the single best predictor. Apart from some curricular enhancements, the most important recent advance in improving the quality of instruction is UDL, which is a product of ongoing research spearheaded by David Rose and associates at the Center for Applied Special Technologies (CAST; Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014; Rose & Meyer, 2002). Nelson (2014) explained that UDL is a framework that guides the shift from designing learning environments and lessons with potential barriers to designing barrier-free instructionally rich learning environments and lessons that provide access to all students. A rich learning environment (i.e., the location where learning is taking place) is designed around the needs of all students, not just those with an identified need (i.e., students with disabilities, student who are English language learners . . . ). (pp. 2, 3)

We hear much about the importance of differentiating instruction, but what better way to approach this complex problem than to attend to the entire ecology of the learning situation? The UDL framework, as Nelson (2014) described, proceeds on the basis of three principles: Engagement, Representation, and Action and Expression, each of which is drawn from brain research in the early days of CAST, circa 2002. Engagement is concerned with how students connect with the lesson; Representation addresses how the material is presented to the student; and Action and Expression enable the teacher to assess the ongoing effectiveness of the instruction. In my view, UDL holds the potential to guide us back to the importance of instruction relative to assessment. By fitting the ecology of learning to what we understand about how the brain processes information and enables responses, we raise the potential to assess learning outcomes during instruction rather than in quarterly and year-end, grade-level tests. Educators beginning to use UDL practices will find Loui Nelson’s (2014) book, Design and Deliver: Planning and Teaching Using Universal Design for Learning, to be a wonderful resource.
Collaborative Teaching

The third recent advance that enhances inclusive education through whole-school applications in the context of school reform is collaborative teaching or co-teaching. The concept of collaborative teaching (general education/special education) as a driver for inclusive arrangements originate from a article by Bawens, Hourcade, and Friend (1989) and since has undergone various iterations and research across a variety of countries (e.g., Gürgür & Uzuner, 2010, 2011; Krüger & Yorke, 2010; Strogilos & Tragoulia, 2013) as well as in the United States (e.g., Rivera, McMahon, & Keys, 2014; Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McCulley, 2012).

Of the three advances cited in this article, co-teaching is characterized by the least variability in definition but the most variability in practice (Solis et al., 2012). This proliferation of different models poses challenges for researchers. Cook and Friend (1995), for example, delineated several models of co-teaching using terminologies such as “station teaching” and “one teaching–one assisting.” As a result, the research literature is characterized by model-specific applications and outcomes. For example, Moorehead and Grillo (2013) focused on the station teaching model to examine student outcomes in mathematics and science education, whereas Scheeler, Congdon, and Stansbery (2010) examined effects of peer feedback using bug-in-ear methodology under the one teaching–one assisting model.

Although research to date suggests that co-teaching can be a valuable enhancement to inclusive practices and associated outcomes for all students, the practice is extremely nuanced and needs to be approached with caution. Simply pairing a special education teacher with a grade-level general education teacher for a particular lesson block may not result in positive outcomes without attention to a variety of factors (Naraian, 2010). Among these are the co-teaching model to be used, compatibility among collaborating teachers, familiarity with the curriculum and lesson plan on the part of the special educator, adequate scheduled planning time, and administrative support for schoolwide application of the practice, to name a few. Even so, as inclusive education systems require shared responsibility for student outcomes, models of effective collaborative teaching become important.

Next Steps

My view is that all advances in schoolwide inclusive school reform, including the three discussed above, are increasingly constrained by systemic structures that are holdovers from the more categorical and separated approaches of the past. As a field, our next steps should include attention to matters of policy, funding, and scale-up of innovative practices to more clearly accommodate and, indeed, impel a steady progress toward whole-school inclusive practices. In this section, I briefly discuss three crucial actions toward this end: (a) braided funding, (b) fully integrated pedagogy, and (c) scaffolding for scaling up within states and school districts.

Braided Funding

The United States is clearly progressing toward a reintegration of educational specializations. Educational unification, particularly affecting special education, has been a policy thrust of the U.S. Department of Education since the administration of Ronald Reagan, when Madeleine Will, Assistant Secretary of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, recognizing that special education was drifting apart from general education and becoming a separate self-contained system, launched the Regular Education Initiative (REI; Will, 1986). Will (1986) advocated for a collaborative, unified system of shared responsibility and accountability that would “bring the program to the child rather than one that brings the child to the program” (p. 23).

A significant barrier to unification is the structure of federal funding streams to the states (Rolle, Harris, & Burrello, 2013). Now is the time to begin some bold new approaches to school finance that clear away constraints of the current system structure, to enable fully effective unified programs given fiscal realities.

Integrating Behavioral and Academic Pedagogy

As discussed in the previous section, the advent of schoolwide applications of PBIS, particularly as embedded in MTSS (Sailor, 2009; Sailor, Doolittle, Bradley, & Danielson, 2009; Sugai & Horner, 2009), has now amassed sufficient evidence from a wide variety of rigorous experiments that, if implemented with fidelity, can significantly improve school achievement measures for all students and all sub-groups (www.pbis.org). The MTSS triangle is frequently depicted as showing three tiers of academic intervention on one side and three tiers of PBIS on the other. Missing, but clearly on the research drawing board, is a series of rigorous investigations into the process of integrating behavioral and academic pedagogy within and across tiers of intervention. A growing body of evidence supports academic MTSS and, as mentioned, a significant body of evidence supports PBIS interventions, but little in conjunction with each other.

In 2007, my colleagues and I published an article calling for the addition of behavioral standards in the context of standards-based reform (Sailor, Stowe, Turnbull, & Kleinhammer-Tramill, 2007). In 2010, the Council of Chief State School Officers launched a Common Core State Standards (CCSS), an initiative aimed at achieving continuity across standards set by the states and aligning goals of...
student achievement for all students (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). All but a handful of states have adopted the CCSS. My only concern with CCSS, which in many ways seems to take curriculum and instruction to a new level, is that once again a course for student learning is charted that ignores behavioral pedagogy. The sum of evidence from applications of schoolwide PBIS clearly reveals the extent to which problem behavior can impede student learning and in high poverty schools can result in punitive measures taken against the entire school (Sailor, 2009). The challenge now will be to fully integrate PBIS interventions with academic instruction at all three tiers of MTSS.

Scaling Up Through Implementation Science

The third next step addresses the ongoing issue of innovative evidence-based practice transfer through scale-up. Probably, most readers of this article will have experienced at some time an exemplary educational practice. Some years ago, I visited a school that had been described as a model for inclusive education. It did, in my opinion at the time, present an exemplary program of inclusive practice; but when I visited other elementary schools in the same district, I encountered only segregated special education programs. I asked the Superintendent why the exemplary practices were not being scaled up in the other elementary schools in the district. The reply was “We don’t need to. We have our inclusion school.”

Inclusive education is a “best practice” and should not be just “an option on a service continuum.” The question is how to scale-up exemplary practices, which is a complicated process and more difficult to achieve than most people think.

Scaling up and sustainability of exemplary practices require scaffolding of parent systems. The parent system of a public school is its district (local educational agency [LEA]). The parent system of districts is the state education agency (SEA). These two parent systems, including any regional intermediaries that function as extensions of the SEA, are the targets of scaffolding for these purposes. Technical assistance and professional development providers need to cast a wider net than a school in isolation. Teams at the level of the LEA and SEA must also be trained to a criterion of fidelity to provide sustainability and spread of effect.

There are two emergent systems of scale-up applicable to the field of education (Metz, 2013; Mitchiner, 2014). One is under development by Abe Wandersman and his colleagues (Meyers et al., 2012; Wandersman et al., 2008), primarily identified with community psychology. The other system was developed by Dean Fixsen, Karen Blase, and their associates (e.g., Fixsen, Blase, Horner, & Sugai, 2009; Fixsen, Blase, Metz, & Van Dyke, 2013). The Wandersman system was informed in part by the earlier work of the Fixsen group, which was one of about 25 such systems Wandersman reviewed. SWIFT Center and one of its partners, the National Technical Assistance Center on PBIS, both utilize the Fixsen system and tools for assessment provided by yet another OSEP-funded center, the State Implementation and Scaling Up of Evidence-Based Practices (SISEP) Center, which is directed by Fixsen and Blase (www.scalingup.org). The next step is to concurrently apply implementation science at the state, local, and school levels.

Summary

In summary, an extensive cultural shift must occur in traditionally organized schools to actualize equity-based, schoolwide inclusive education. From many possible choices, I describe three important advances toward this end: (a) a MTSS with embedded RTI, which includes positive behavioral interventions and supports; (b) UDL; and (c) collaborative instruction involving general and specialized educators. I suggest three critical next steps to improve educational outcomes for all students, particularly for students for whom typical instruction is not effective: (a) implementing flexible, braided funding across educational programs; (b) fully integrating behavioral and academic interventions pedagogy within MTSS; and (c) scaling up and sustaining innovative and evidence-based practices through implementation science.

Author’s Note

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