

What Should I See When I Walk through an Inclusive, Differentiated Classroom?

Principals as Instructional Leaders

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Administrators and Teachers on the Same Page

I was doing some long-term coaching at a high school that had initiated co-teaching as a solution to meeting Adequate Yearly Progress with their subgroups. We were focused on differentiated instruction strategies and collaborative techniques. I presented initial trainings in the district that the teachers were required to attend; however, there were no administrators present. Departmental leaders responsible for evaluating teachers were also absent from these training sessions. After the initial training, I worked with the schools in-house by observing teachers in the classroom and supported their efforts to reach all students by coaching them to take their teaching up a level.

On one of my consultation visits for the district, a teacher whom I observed earlier in the day was scheduled to debrief with me that same afternoon. When she entered the conference

room, she seemed distraught. As I gently questioned her to discover how her teaching practices had been progressing, I found her to be strangely silent. I had observed some wonderful activity in her classroom, so I began to share that with her. Rather than brightening at my positive comments, she burst into tears. I asked her what was wrong. She explained that after my previous observation of her work, she had taken my suggestions and incorporated many of the strategies I shared with her in our training and coaching sessions. The teacher had implemented nonlinguistic representation via color and visual images to enhance her instruction (Ewy, 2002) and incorporated cooperative learning into her lesson plan (Gregory & Kuzmich, 2010).

The teacher said she felt confident that the strategies she had implemented in her classroom were effective, and student success had markedly improved. However, during that time she was also evaluated by her departmental coordinator. Rather than being pleased with the instructional strategies he observed, he chastised the teacher for having too much “fluff” in the classroom. Further, he did not think she had adequately focused on the concept of rigor and also complained that she lacked effective classroom management skills because the class was too noisy.

Honestly, I was outraged that this teacher, who was doing exactly what she should be doing according to the latest brain research and studies on what increases student achievement, was being chastised and written up by an evaluator who had not attended my training and who obviously had little understanding of the latest educational research. I felt her pain and realized that I would not be able to make any gains in this district unless the administrators came to understand differentiated instruction, what to look for in a differentiated classroom, and the latest research on how the brain learns.

Most school leaders know the importance of rigor in the classroom. However, the definition of rigor can be confusing (Blackburn, 2013). According to Strong, Silver, and Perini, “Rigor is the goal of helping students develop the capacity to understand content that is complex, ambiguous, provocative, and personally or emotionally challenging” (2001). Rigor is the level of knowledge, the complexity of thought, or the high standard to which we hold our students. How we reach that level of rigor, the methodologies we use, and the brain-based research implemented in our classrooms are critical to the process (Sawchuk, 2012) a set of U.S. national educational standards for language arts and mathematics, and examines how school districts are training educators to incorporate lesson in kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12). Therefore, if a teacher requires students to understand high-level content and use critical thinking and the teacher is implement-

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ing methodologies that include nonlinguistic representation and cooperative learning, it may appear to an onlooker that “fluff” is happening in the classroom when in all actuality what is happening is really terrific instruction (Hanson, 2009).

According to the latest brain research and studies on what increases student achievement, this teacher had implemented highly effective teaching strategies and was doing exactly what she should have been doing. However, since her departmental coordinator did not attend the training I presented regarding instructional strategies in the inclusive, differentiated classroom (Fiero, 2012), he had minimal understanding of the latest educational research for differentiating instruction in the classroom. This becomes an even larger issue when one considers that Common Core State Standards can only be met by implementing more student-centered teaching strategies that include differentiated strategies and activities that support a deeper depth of knowledge and critical thinking (Sawchuk, 2012) a set of U.S. national educational standards for language arts and mathematics, and examines how school districts are training educators to incorporate lesson in kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12).

The price school districts pay for having teachers attend educational training without the support of their principals or department leaders runs deep. In my experience working with schools as a consultant and coach for the past 14 years, it has become clear that when I work with a school in which the principal, assistant principals, and, if present, the departmental coordinators are on-board with the initiative, there will be success. When everyone is on the same page and willing to do the work of coaching and supporting teachers to reach the next level, success is inevitable.

Sadly, I have seen more administrators assume a hands-off approach in their positions as instructional leaders. School leaders are overwhelmed with paperwork, budgets, parent crises, grievances, and district mandates. School leaders often take a principal’s position because in their heart and soul they want to make a positive difference for youth and the educators who teach

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them. Some very quickly become jaded as the reality sets in that their time is not their own and their vision appears to be sabotaged by countless obstacles.

I'll never forget the time a principal looked at me, barely able to contain his emotion, and said, "I've always been a believer that the principal should walk through classrooms and support teachers. This year, I've rarely been able to do walk-throughs. The district office requires so much paperwork from me that I spend all my time in the office or attending meetings. I'm not the principal I want to be." School principals are often caught between what the district wants and what teachers want; they are in a tough position.

Despite the obstacles, successful schools have powerful and successful leaders who understand how to motivate human beings in a positive and constructive manner and view themselves as instructional leaders. So, what's the solution? What does an instructional leader look for?

Look for Instructional Strategies that Fit the Student

In this test-driven educational world, we often see teachers attempting to cover an immense amount of material very quickly with the same students at the same time, at the same pace, with the same books, using a direct teaching approach that does not reach all learners nor foster critical thinking. In addition to that, we have some teachers using scripted programs who are forbidden to deviate from the script even when they know that they are not reaching some of their students.

When coaching teachers who are using a scripted text to reach all learners, show them how to maintain the fidelity of their instructional program by differentiating instruction based on data. Teachers can use ongoing progress monitoring to determine whom they need to re-teach or provide more practice and whom to accelerate. Common Core State Standards are proving successful in eliminating the crutch of scripted programs; on the flip side, however, teachers used to having the lesson plan prepared for

them may feel lost and overwhelmed in the push to create lesson plans aligned to the Common Core.

Look for a Positive Classroom Environment

When doing a walk-through or an observation, take note of the physical environment in the classroom. Research indicates that students achieve more when they feel safe, positive, and comfortable in their environment (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). Lighting, seating arrangements, and background music that promotes alpha and beta brain waves that are primed for learning all impact student achievement (Brewer, 2007). The teaching environment also includes teaching in a way that reaches all learners, encourages cooperation between students, supports student success, and implements data collection and intervention without belittling or stigmatizing students who struggle.

Look for a Variety of Reading Levels

Look at the reading levels of materials being used in the classroom. Now, this has become a bit tricky in that there are multiple ways to determine reading levels. In the past, I used the Flesch-Kincaid readability formula or the SMOG or Fry readability formulas. These formulas, however, were developed in the last century. That does make them sound old, doesn't it? What is significant, however, is that I continually see students being asked to read material that is two to three grade levels above their reading level according to these formulas. In addition to that discrepancy, teachers are using Lexile measures and Developmental Reading Assessments (DRA) to determine reading levels. I have found there to be a huge disconnect between the standard reading formulas, Lexile measures, and DRA.

Recently, I was in an 8th grade classroom where the students were reading material that registered at a 1st grade reading level based on the Flesch-Kincaid readability formula. When I questioned the teacher about the reading level, she stated with confidence that the material was at the 4th grade level based on Lexile scores. She showed me where I might find these materials online. I verified that the website she was using stated this material was at the 4th grade level. There seems to be a huge disconnect between the various measures of reading levels available. Solution: Make sure teachers are aware of at least two measures of the reading levels of class materials. If teachers are using Lexiles or DRA, then also use a readability formula to determine the reading ease of the text.

Look for Visual Cues

Is the teacher using visual cues? Nonlinguistic representation significantly enhances memory and recall (Shalmani & Sabet,

2010). Are materials largely text based or is linguistic information enhanced with nonlinguistic representation?

Look for Movement Strategies

Are students sitting in their seats for the entire class or are teachers chunking their lesson plans and thereby providing a variety of activities in the classroom (Nayak, 2006)? Possibly, teachers start the class with some direct teaching and after about 10 minutes they stop and do a movement activity that includes investigation. Are students engaging in interactive projects that require critical thinking during the lesson, even if only for small chunks of time?

Look for Flexible Grouping

Are teachers using whole class instruction for the entire period or the majority of it? Or are teachers chunking their lesson plans and presenting small chunks of direct instruction, then breaking into small groups so that students might process information together, and then pulling the class back together to wrap up discussion? Are teachers using data from frequent progress monitoring to group students? Are they using mixed-ability groups as well as same-ability groups, depending on the goal of the instruction?

Are Teachers Using Technology to Engage Students?

I have seen classrooms decorated with expensive interactive whiteboards. I use the word “decorated” deliberately. Very rarely do I see an interactive whiteboards used to capacity, especially in the secondary classrooms. Teachers armed with interactive whiteboards and document readers often use this amazing technology as a glorified whiteboard or overhead. I have also seen teachers use iPads in the classroom to keep students busy while they work with other small groups. Teachers need to be strongly encouraged to take charge of their own learning and become well versed in technology. We are educating digital natives, and it does our students a disservice to teach without embracing the technological world in which they live.

Are Students Offered Instructional Choices?

Offering students choices is critical to positive student motivation, development of executive functioning skills, and good decision making, as well as fostering personal responsibility, empowerment, and ownership of behavior. We are currently working in an educational world that tells students what to do every step of the way. We minimize social interaction, where students learn appropriate social behavior and the consequences of that behavior, and we maximize compliance, all for the goal of increased test scores. Our employers are grumbling that their high school and college

graduate new hires cannot make a decision on their own, think on their feet, or move without being told exactly what to do. Research indicates that when students have choices, achievement increases (Killu, Clare, & Im, 1999).

Are Teachers Using Memory Strategies?

Once again, memorization in schools is under attack. It boggles my mind that we continually throw the baby out with the bathwater in our educational trends. There is significant research that indicates that automaticity of essential foundational knowledge frees up working memory so that students can focus their mind space on higher-level critical thinking, and emotional and physical strengths—and teaching directly to these strengths—is key to sculpting “a mind at a time,” according to Levine (2003). While this flashing yellow light will not surprise many skilled educators, limited resources often prevent them from shifting their instructional gears. But to teachers and parents whose children face daily humiliation at school, the author bellows, “Try harder!” A professor of pediatrics at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine, Levine eloquently substantiates his claim that developmental growth deserves the same monitoring as a child’s physical growth. Tales of creative, clumsy, impulsive, nerdy, intuitive, loud-mouthed, and painfully shy kids help Levine define eight specific mind systems (attention, memory, language, spatial ordering, sequential ordering, motor, higher thinking, and social thinking. If students do not know their multiplication tables, then their working memory is calculating instead of doing higher-level mathematical thinking. If students are worrying about their grammar, punctuation, or how to spell a word, then their mind space is being used up trying to remember those rules instead of using their creativity and higher-level thinking skills to create prose. There is a place in education for memorization. The key is finding a balance between memorization, critical thinking, processing, project-based learning, and collaboration with other students. Memorization is not the enemy; poor teaching is the enemy.

Is the Instruction Engaging?

It still amazes me that I can walk into secondary classrooms and see teaching that looks no different than poor teaching in the 1960s. We live in a different world today. Our students no longer have the opportunity to be apprentices for a trade at 16 years old. We can no longer teach to verbal linguistic students who can learn by lecture alone. The hard reality is that we need to reach all learners. In order to reach all learners in a digital age, where brains have been trained to expect flash and change every 3 to 15 seconds, we need to engage students with instruction that meets their learning needs.

Administration: Supporting, Nurturing, and Celebrating Differentiated Instruction

I have worked with many school districts over the past 14 years and I can say without any hesitancy that the commitment an administrator has toward any initiative has a direct influence on the success of that initiative. School administrators who actively support teacher improvement with a nurturing manner are more likely to be successful than administrators who do not support school improvement initiatives. Supporting school improvement initiatives needs to go beyond lip service. We are in a challenging time for educators. In many ways, teachers are under attack. Schools are often under attack. And, consequently, principals are under attack.

Conclusion

Learning in an inclusive, differentiated classroom asks teachers to use a variety of innovative methods to increase student achievement. This involves implementing differentiated activities and instructional strategies that fit each student's needs. Offering students instructional choices enhances their motivation, helps them develop high-functioning skills and good decision-making ability, and fosters personal responsibility, empowerment, and ownership of behavior.

In addition, educational concepts in the inclusive, differentiated learning environment are central to alignment with Common Core State Standards. These standards foster learning activities that raise students to a higher level of knowledge and empower them with critical thinking skills. For Common Core objectives to be achieved, teachers and school administrators must work together.

Administrators need to understand that the foundation of an inclusive, differentiated classroom differs in many ways from a traditional learning setting. In order to do this, administrators need to attend in-service training and workshops alongside their teachers. This professional relationship will support both teachers and administrators as they learn the underlying concepts of inclusive, differentiated instruction and its relationship to Common Core standards. Administrators who actively support teacher improvement are more likely to be successful than administrators who do not support school improvement initiatives. When teachers and administrators are on the same page working together to achieve student success, everybody wins.

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