Assessing Students with Exceptional Learning Needs

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A universal approach to teaching is no longer effective because it will not appropriately and effectively meet the unique learning needs of students in inclusive classrooms. As a result, teachers and school leaders must learn how to best support students with special needs, and educational leaders will need to provide professional learning opportunities and support to teachers to ensure that appropriate teaching and assessment practices are being utilized to effectively meet the needs of all students. The use of formative assessment is an effective tool for teachers to appropriately differentiate instruction through a Response to Intervention (RTI) model. Despite potential challenges, leaders can have a positive impact on the success of inclusive assessment practices in their schools. To support all learners, it is essential that teachers create safe learning environments for their students. Also, leaders need to encourage collaboration and ongoing communication between the school and parents. Finally, students need to be involved in the learning process, so it is important that teachers get to know their students from both an academic and personal perspective. This will allow teachers to plan effective and appropriate opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning.

Teachers and school leaders should consider the means by which to appropriately and effectively assess all students, as inclusive classrooms are no longer the exception, they are the norm. In Alberta, students are entering school with increasingly unique and complex learning needs, and it is the teacher's responsibility to support the learning of diverse students in inclusive classrooms (Morton & McMenamin, 2011; Alberta Education, 2010). Alberta Learning (2002) described students with disabilities as experiencing lifelong challenges and difficulties that affect their ability to learn and process information. The problem here is that many teachers are unaware and uncertain about how to effectively teach in inclusive classrooms, because they feel they lack the necessary training and support required to meet the diverse needs of the students they work with every day (Lin & Lin, 2015; Morton & McMenamin, 2011). As a result, teachers and school leaders must learn how to best support students with special needs in our increasingly complex and diverse classrooms. Moreover, it is important for educational leaders to embrace

and support teacher development of inclusive assessment practices to meet the needs and improve the learning of all students (Bourke & Mentis, 2014).

Methods

A universal approach to teaching is not sufficient for today's inclusive classrooms, because diverse leaners require a variety of instructional and assessment methods in order to provide teachers with an accurate and thorough description of a student's learning (Bourke & Mentis, 2014). Black and Wiliam (1998) suggested that improvements to student learning can only be made when teachers implement changes directly, by working with students in their classrooms. Alberta Education (2010) suggested that one way that teachers can provide individual and meaningful learning opportunities for all students is through differentiated instruction, because "differentiation depends on knowing and using a variety of teaching methods so that students have opportunities to learn and demonstrate their learning in multiple ways" (p. 5).

For most students, effective differentiated instruction will be enough to foster growth and learning; however, some students will require more supports and need individualized opportunities to demonstrate their learning (Wiliam, 2016; Alberta Education, 2010). In these situations, Response to Intervention (RTI) is an essential framework for education. This is because RTI builds on differentiated classroom instruction and assessment strategies by allowing for increased and targeted interventions to support students with higher needs through the use of formative assessment (Wiliam, 2016). Wiliam (2016) explained that formative assessment is a key driver in carrying out effective differentiated instruction and response to intervention initiatives, because formative assessment provides opportunities for students to engage in learning and personalize learning to suit individual needs.

Additionally, Alberta Education (2010) reminded teachers that, "the goal is not to have an individualized assessment plan for each student, but to have a manageable class assessment plan that is flexible enough to accommodate a range of student needs" (p. 47). This can be achieved through the use of formative assessment strategies. Chappius and Stiggins (2002) described formative assessment as a process directly involving students. When teachers and students work interactively to combine a variety of assessment approaches, both parties will gain assessment information that is accurate, comprehensive and reflective, while at the same time allowing learners to develop as self-directed, focused, motivated, and engaged learners (Bourke, Mentis, & Todd, 2011; Bourke & Mentis, 2014; Morton & McMenamin, 2011). Finally, Black and Wiliam (1998) recognized that "while formative assessment can help all pupils, it yields particularly good results with low achievers by concentrating on specific problems with their work and giving them a clear understanding of what is wrong and how to put it right" (p. 6), rather than concentrating on effort, ability, and comparisons to other students.

Nevertheless, educators must be cautious of formative assessment practices to ensure that the activities and strategies are truly inclusive and appropriate for individual learners with special needs. For example, Ravet (2013) cautioned that learners with autism experience great difficulty in communication and when engaging in social interactions, so teachers should make modifications to formative assessment activities that require such skills. Therefore, to effectively accommodate students with learning disabilities, teachers must have a solid understanding of both the disability, and of formative assessment strategies, and also demonstrate a willingness to modify the learning environments in their classrooms (Ravet, 2013).

Results

Leaders tend to have a significant impact on the quality of teaching that occurs within schools, and this can indirectly contribute to increased student learning and achievement; however, improving teacher quality as a means to improve student achievement for all students is a significant challenge for educational leaders (Bourke & Mentis, 2014; Webber, Scott, Aitken, Lupart, & Scott, 2013). One of the reasons for this challenge is that many teachers have expressed concern and uncertainty in how to best support learners with special needs: teachers feel they lack necessary training, professional development, and they ask for leadership support to help them improve their own understandings of effective instructional practices and learning disabilities (Morton & McMenamin, 2011; Ravet, 2013).

In response, leaders must work with their school communities to establish "a culture of success, backed by the belief that all pupils can achieve" (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 6). This culture must be created before initiatives such as differentiated instruction and RTI policies can be effectively implemented in schools. In order for schools to support the notion that all students can learn, learning disabilities cannot be viewed as the reason, or as an excuse for why the needs of exceptional students are not being met (Morton & McMenamin, 2011).

By using differentiated instruction and the RTI model, leaders can have a positive impact on the success of inclusive assessment practices in their schools. This can be accomplished by ensuring teachers receive appropriate and effective professional development, so teachers can confidently contribute to inclusive schools by creating safe learning environments, foster effective communication and collaboration, and get to know students.

Creating Safe Learning Environments

As teachers attempt to change their roles within the classroom, the relationship between teacher and student is critical. When teachers create differentiated assessment opportunities for students, they provide students with the opportunity to be responsible for their own learning by supporting and mentoring these students, rather than being relied upon to simply deliver knowledge (Learn Alberta, 2008; Black et al., 2004). When the teachers and students are working together in this way, students need to feel safe in their learning environment, and feel as though they are capable of success. Black and Wiliam (1998) reported that low achieving students often avoid challenging tasks and are reluctant to persevere due to low self-esteem and a fear of failure, but teacher feedback that focuses on criteria and how to improve, rather than on ability and competition can have positive effects on student achievement. Moreover, the "development of strong, respectful and positive relationships between teachers and learners … is a critical factor in a successful formative assessment process" (Bourke et al., 2011, p. 409), because it will allow students to be more comfortable with sharing their perspectives, challenges and learning goals with their teacher and peers.

For many teachers, it is a priority to create accepting and welcoming learning environments. Teachers often spend a significant amount of time and effort, especially at the beginning of each school year, developing a positive classroom culture with their students; however, some teachers may require additional support to successfully welcome and embrace all students. Lin and Lin (2015) studied the perceptions of pre-service teachers in regard to teaching students with learning disabilities and they concluded that inclusive assessment training cannot occur without first knowing the perceptions and misunderstandings teacher candidates had towards teaching students with special needs. "As the purpose of [assessment for learning] is to strengthen and advance student learning, it is critical for teacher educators to assist future

teachers in modifying and changing the perspectives for future teaching practices" (Lin & Lin, 2015, p. 781).

Finally, a positive school culture depends on the ability of school leaders to model the way. School principals will successfully lead change when they are guided by a strong set of values led by a moral conscience (Webber et al., 2013). When principals' interactions with students with special needs reflect sincerity, acceptance, and empathy, teachers and students will be more responsive to embracing an inclusive school.

Effective Communication

In order for teachers to effectively assess students, it is important that they provide appropriate opportunities for students to communicate their learning. The importance of teacher feedback is an essential component of the formative assessment process when it is specific, descriptive, and immediate (Chappius & Stiggins, 2002; Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Furthermore, when teachers are frequently providing feedback to students, it allows teachers to assess student performance and adjust or modify teaching approaches as necessary (Alberta Learning, 2002). Feedback can be provided formally and informally through a variety of means, so it is essential for teachers to provide students with opportunities to express themselves in ways that are appropriate to their learning needs. Ravet (2013) explained this by recognizing the communication challenges that many autistic students experience. She noted that when teachers expect autistic students to interpret feedback, engage in questioning, self and peer assessments, and other '"talk" based activities, learning can be misrepresented by students with autism, thereby providing teachers with incorrect or unreliable information (Ravet, 2013).

This feedback, along with self-assessments, will support learners in not only recognizing where they currently are at with their learning, but where they need to go (Chappius & Stiggins, 2002). Self-assessment can contribute to meaningful learning, and it is a skill that the majority of students are capable of (Chappius & Stiggins, 2002); therefore, self-assessment is also an effective assessment strategy for inclusive classrooms.

In addition to ensuring there are effective methods of communication between teachers and students, communication with parents is another essential component to the academic success of students with special needs. Students and parents must be included in working with school personnel in the planning, development, and assessment of student goals. Teachers cannot overlook the knowledge held by parents of children with disabilities when they are trying to accommodate students with special needs in their classrooms, as parents are a valuable source of knowledge and information (Morton & McMenamin, 2011; Alberta Learning, 2002). When teachers create meaningful assessment opportunities using a differentiated approach, teachers are able to gather more authentic and accurate information about the abilities and challenges facing students, which will "result in clearer and more meaningful discussions about ongoing learning with the learners, and their peers, and parents" (Bourke & Mentis, 2014, p. 394).

Finally, educational leaders should also be involved in communication about the progress and challenges facing students with special needs. Principals are ultimately responsible for ensuring that teachers are communicating student achievement with the appropriate stakeholders, and it is school leaders who must share the school assessment policies with parents and ensure that they are understood (Webber et al., 2013).

Knowing Your Learners

In order "to address individual learning needs, it is imperative for teachers to adapt their assessment and teaching practices for these students … [and] match students' special needs with the types of accommodations and the purposes of assessments" (Lin & Lin, 2015, p. 774). The advantage of using assessment for learning activities is that its differentiated approach allows opportunities for both teachers and students to identify their challenges and strengths through a variety of methods (Alberta Education, 2010). Teachers can encourage students to be uniquely assessed in ways that appropriately address individual learning needs by providing students with choices in how to showcase a final product, accommodating activities to allow the use of multiple intelligences, or using assessment tools such as learning logs, and journals, for example (Alberta Education, 2010). Teachers can modify or adapt both formative and summative assessments, or allow the use of alternate assignments as a means to allow students with learning disabilities the opportunity to accurately demonstrate their learning without allowing their disability to interfere with the assessment process or the results (Alberta Learning, 2002). Ravet (2012) stated, "[I]f the needs of learners on the autism spectrum are met using approaches such as these, the learning environment will become more 'autism friendly' and the data yielded by formative assessment is likely to be better focused, reliable and accurate" (p. 961).

Discussion

Educational leaders need to be aware of challenges that can impede their ability to support teachers in diverse classroom environments. One factor that can have a negative effect on teachers' abilities to appropriately differentiate instruction is the lack of training about students with disabilities, and the lack of professional learning opportunities available to them as teachers. Another challenge that leaders face when developing inclusive schools, is trying to change teachers' negative perceptions and opinions regarding students with special needs to more positive ones.

First of all, Morton and McMenamin (2011) summarized the lack of teacher training in special education by recognizing that most teacher education programs do not provide sufficient teacher training in the areas of inclusive education. Most teachers who are knowledgeable in special education have pursued postgraduate training to specialize in this area (Morton & McMenamin, 2011). With the increasingly complex and challenging nature of inclusive classrooms, post-secondary institutions should seriously consider including inclusive education courses into their standard teacher education programs. Of course, Ravet (2013) would further suggest that teacher education and training needs to involve both an understanding of inclusive education and of formative assessment, as one cannot rely upon the other.

Additionally, educational leaders must continually support teacher development of inclusive assessment practices at all stages of one's teaching career. School leaders can create opportunities for teachers to collaborate through embedded and ongoing professional development in a variety of ways. Notably, Morton and McMenamin (2011) suggested that collaboration "can lead to capacity building and professional learning among teachers that would promote inclusion and support access to the curriculum for all students" (p. 110). As a result, teacher growth and understanding can be achieved through professional development with a focus on collaborative learning such as the implementation of professional learning communities.

Finally, educational leaders must develop a school culture that embodies the belief that all students can learn, despite the challenges caused by learning disabilities or any other factor that may affect a student's academic achievement. Black and Wiliam (1998) recommended that

when teachers are effectively using formative assessment in their classrooms, teachers will be more successful in uncovering potential in those students who previously struggled to experience academic success. Similarly, "inclusive formative assessment can be more successful where teachers can abstract themselves from the straightjacket of normative thinking about learning in order to understand the minds of children who function differently" (Ravet, 2013, p. 961).

Although changing the perceptions of teachers is a great challenge, educational leaders must be persistent in attempting to influence these positive changes. Webber et al. (2013) recommended that leaders begin by working first, with those teachers who are open to learning and adapting their worldviews and teaching practices. This is what Wiliam (2016) referred to as finding the bright spots. It is also important for leaders to model the way by staying true to their vision and values, and relying on both "procedural and pragmatic knowledge" (Webber et al., 2013, p. 251). Conversely, Volante (2010) explained that many administrators actually lack a proficient theoretical understanding of assessment for learning; therefore, it is important that while educational leaders demonstrate a willingness to learn, they also utilize the expertise of staff through distributed leadership models.

Conclusion

Nobody said change is easy, and leading change is even more difficult; however, it can be done. When diverse students enter our schools, every single one of them deserves to be provided with opportunities that will meet their individual and unique learning needs. When teachers use differentiated instruction they create authentic experiences for students, allowing them to take ownership of their learning. When learning is personalized, assessments will be more meaningful and more accurate. Therefore, assessment for learning is the tool needed to bring RTI to life and to create more inclusive learning opportunities for all students, regardless of ability.

Although Wiliam (2016) provided clear evidence that formative assessment is the solution for improving student achievement, assessment for learning practices can only begin when teachers create safe learning environments for their students, collaborate and use effective communication, and when they build relationships with their students by getting to know them. Since teachers do not feel prepared to adequately teach students with diverse learning needs, the role of educational leaders is essential in fostering the notion that all students can succeed. However, educational leaders must be patient because change at this magnitude will not happen immediately. School administrators have to prioritize inclusive education as a key goal for school improvement, and provide continuous opportunities for teacher professional development in both formative assessment and in understanding students with special needs. Future research would be needed to investigate what professional development strategies would be most beneficial to teachers, and to further explore the role of school leaders in fostering the learning and implementation of such professional learning.

In conclusion, principals must create opportunities for teachers to learn how to meet the needs of students with special needs by effectively modifying and adapting formative assessment activities in ways which will complement a student's disability, not compete with it. Principals can provide ongoing professional support to teachers by creating opportunities for teachers to continually attempting to improve their practice. This will entail a clear focus on the use of formative assessment to meet the diverse learning needs of students, as well as time, space, support, and encouragement for teachers to improve their practice and understandings (Wiliam,

2016). "Inclusion in education and society ultimately relies on inclusive thinking … through diverse and supportive action that values all learners" (Bourke & Mentis, 2014, p. 395).

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