

Student Diversity

Classroom strategies to meet the learning needs of all students

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Introduction

We believe that teachers need to share the contents of their teaching toolboxes and how they use their tools successfully.

The headlines in our weekend paper scream “Who Are We Calling Special?” In the lead article, the President of the Provincial Intermediate Teachers’ Association is quoted as saying “We don’t have time and we don’t have the tools” to address the learning needs of all the students in the class, including those in the “grey area,” who are unidentified but need support. These comments are timely. It is comments like these that propelled us to put our ideas on paper, to write this edition of *Student Diversity*. We believe that it is time to work differently in our schools, in order to better meet the needs of a diverse group of students. We believe that tools do exist for teaching all students, but that they are not necessarily the tools we have been traditionally using. We believe that teachers need to share the contents of their respective toolboxes and how they use their tools successfully, alone and together.

In the past, as resource teachers, our task was to work with select groups of students—to assess their learning, to teach them specific skills, to catch them up, to teach them differently, to give them more individual attention and time. In this role, we were very much captains of our own ships, running our programs and occasionally consulting with teachers as to how they could best support our students when they were in the other teachers’ classrooms. We often saw significant progress with our students, particularly when they were in a supported learning situation; i.e., learning with us in a small group. Unfortunately we also heard the comment, “He may do that with you, but in the classroom with everyone else....” We often wished we could have more time with these students in order to really make a difference.

We also have had the opportunity to work more collaboratively as resource teachers, where the expectation is to support the classroom teacher and the class—the diverse class including all students. In this role, we work together with the classroom teacher, pooling our expertise and our resources. We assess the students using provincial performance standards to see what they can do and what they need to be able to do. We use this assessment to design lessons and units that move the students toward accomplishing curriculum goals. We sometimes work side-by-side with the classroom teacher, in the classroom, focusing on how best to support the learning of all students in the context of the ongoing learning expectations. We find our collaboration increases the amount of learning time for students and increases everyone’s skill set—our toolbox.

As classroom teachers, we know the weight of responsibility of trying to teach classrooms of diverse students, sometimes feeling that it is just too much, that what we have always done is no longer working. But we also know that there are classrooms where learning *is* happening for all students. We know that books, workshops, and online presentations are available to take us beyond the confines of our personal experiences. We know that when we work as a team in a school we *can* make a difference to student learning, we *can* improve our competencies, and we *can* leave at the end of the day, confident not only that our students feel like they belong in our class but that they—and we—have evidence that they are progressing along their respective learning journeys.

Building Vibrant Learning Environments

Current brain research and learning theory support what intuitive teachers have long known:

- Students need to be actively engaged in learning.
- Students need to belong to a strong community in the classroom.
- Students need to see themselves as able and capable learners.
- Students need to set personal learning goals.
- Students need to be learning in a variety of ways.
- Students need to be emotionally involved in their learning.
- Students learn at different rates.
- Students need rich, in-depth inquiry.
- Students learn best when the content is connected to the world and to their lives.
- Students need choice and clear expectations.

These are foundation statements for our classrooms, and you will see evidence of them in the classroom scenarios in this book. This book is meant to provide teachers with new tools to enable them to better support all the students in their classes, and with ideas for how to minimize their planning time and increase the learning time for their students.

The scenarios described in *Student Diversity* are situated in combined or multi-age classes from Grades 4/5, 5/6, or 6/7, or in single-grade classes from Grades 6 to 10. All the classes support full inclusion of learners with special needs and a collaborative resource model. Each has been affected by a large influx of learners who are learning English as a second or third language. Teachers in these classes are trying to make sense of a curriculum organized by grade-mandated learning outcomes or expectations, criterion-referenced assessment, provincial performance standards, and current learning theory.

In *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004), the authors present an interesting mathematical equation: $15 - 3 = 0$.

They suggest that there are 15 research-based strategies to improve adolescent literacy. They also suggest that none of these strategies will make a difference to student learning unless we incorporate these three vital strategies:

- Professional Development: Teachers cannot do this alone. The needs are constantly changing, the knowns are constantly growing, and we must provide structures to support the learning of all our teachers.
- Ongoing Formative Assessment of Students: To make the greatest difference, we must use our assessment information to inform our instruction.
- Ongoing Summative Assessment of Students and Programs: It is our responsibility to check and see that what we are doing is making a difference.

It is our hope that *Student Diversity* contributes to this discussion. We present to you the best of what we have learned from collaborations with teachers who are using their time and their tools to make a difference to the learning of all their students. You may be in a teaching situation without the benefit of a team or a professional learning community. Perhaps *Student Diversity* will become part of your team. Join us as we attempt to put into practice the best of what we know. Together we can improve learning for all.

When thinking literacy strategies,
remember this equation: $15 - 3 = 0$.