CELEBRATING THE CHALLENGES

The Delta Lodge at Kananaskis - October 16th to 18th, 2014

Pre-Conference
Paula Kluth
Inclusive Classrooms: Creating more engaging and responsive schooling experiences
A full day interactive session designed to learn practical ways of supporting students with disabilities within the classroom.

Conference Strands
1. UDL, Differentiation & Personalization
2. Technology
3. Diversity
4. Mental Health and Behaviour
5. Inclusionary Practices

Keynotes and Featured Speakers
Jo Gusman  ELL and Trauma
Dr. Gary Jones  Boys and Learning
Brian Shustack  Impact of Trauma
Allan Donsky  Mindfulness
Philip Jones
Mike and Tim!

Thursday Evening Keynote - How to fit a heart attack into your busy schedule...
Saturday Keynote - Handicap this!

Social Events
Thursday, October 16th  Wine & Cheese Reception
Friday, October 17th  Dance
Join us as we celebrate together Mardi Gras style with our favourite band “Fun in the Front Seat”.

Pre-Conference Rates
By Sept 13  After Sept 13th
Special Education Council member $150.00  $200.00
Individuals ineligible for specialist council membership* $300.00  $400.00

Conference Rates
Special Education Council member (Regular & Subscription) $235.00  $285.00
Individuals ineligible for specialist council membership* $470.00  $570.00
Student (includes 1 year student membership to council) $145.00  $195.00

*Central office staff who are eligible for active membership in the Association but have elected associate or non-membership are not eligible for specialist council membership. Teachers in charter, federal and private schools must

More Information
Register Here: http://goo.gl/hHiqPX1 (Registration opens Tuesday May 20, 2014 - Scan to Register)
Visit: www.celebratethechallenges.ca  Registration Email: speedconference@gmail.com
Phone: (403) 615-5212 (after 4:00pm)
Contact: Darci Fulton, Conference Director - celebratethechallenges2011@gmail.com

UNDERSTANDING EDUCATION IN OUR TRANSFORMING WORLD.

From the reactive, the proactive and then the creative regimes, we learn the rules and apply them to our own circumstances.
President’s Message

With a new school year upon us, I reflect on the hard work, dedication and commitment of Alberta’s teachers. Long after students have gone home for the day, teachers are still at the school, eating supper and meeting about students. Other teachers are supervising sports activities, choir practice or homework clubs. Many other teachers have brought home marking and planning to complete in the evening. Teachers are some of the hardest-working professionals I can think of. It is my hope that through the work of the Special Education Council (and other ATA specialist councils) we can support the work and impact of colleagues throughout all Alberta public schools.

The Special Education Council supports its members through the year by hosting sessions at the Beginning Teachers’ Conferences and holding our annual Celebrating the Challenges conference in Kananaskis, as well as many professional development activities through our regional councils around Alberta. I encourage you to get involved with your regional council by attending meetings, contacting your president, suggesting topics for workshops, and attending conferences and workshops. The networking and collegial support that members experience at these events enhance our teaching practice and help us be the best teachers we can be for all our students.

I would like to express a special thank you to our outgoing past president, Dorothy Arts. Dorothy has been a leader for the council and the Celebrating the Challenges conference for well over a decade. Over the years, her leadership style, knowledge, and insight into special education and inclusive education have contributed to our growth, development and change as professionals, and will continue to impact the learning and success of the students in our classrooms. I deeply admire and respect Dorothy, and I sincerely thank her for everything she has taught me. I wish her all the best personally and professionally, and I look forward to reconnecting when our paths cross again in the future.

I hope you all had a relaxing, rejuvenating and enjoyable summer. I look forward to seeing you in the fall at the Celebrating the Challenges conference in Kananaskis.

Hayley Christen

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The Special Education Council’s mission is to advance the education of individuals with diverse special needs and to improve the practices and resources of persons working on behalf of such individuals throughout the province of Alberta.

A publication of the Alberta Teachers’ Association.

Cover: The painting on the cover was painted by the students at Bowcroft School, in Calgary, to be part of a mural on a construction site. Their teacher is Jennifer Cairney.
Editor’s Message

At the end of the school year, we are usually left wondering where the time went. It is a time for self-reflection and a well-deserved break to rejuvenate ourselves for the fall. The last school year was a time of change, new directions and some turmoil in education. We look forward to new challenges and opportunities in the new school year.

This fall the Special Education Council will be looking for some new executive members. Please read about those opportunities in this issue of The Special Educator. We are also looking at changing the name of our council, which would also mean a change to the name of our newsletter. We will discuss this at our annual general meeting, to be held at the Celebrating the Challenges conference in October. Make sure to put the conference on your calendar and register early!

In this issue of The Special Educator, we share some of the great professional development our regionals have offered across the province, new resources in the ATA library and updates from Alberta Education. Check out the article on Alberta Education’s Curriculum Redesign initiative and how you can get support and updates from your regional professional development consortium. There is also a review of Rethinking Equity: Creating a Great School for All, coedited by Stephen Murgatroyd and J-C Couture (Future Think Press, 2013). This book was sent to Special Education Council members last year. Finally, Paula Kluth’s article on differentiating instruction will give you a feel for her work in inclusive environments. Paula is a renowned speaker and writer on inclusive education, and she will present the preconference session at Celebrating the Challenges.

I hope everyone had a fun and relaxing summer break!

Kelly Huck
PEC on SEC

Determining teacher excellence—who’s getting it right?

It’s justifiable to think that through polling parents, teachers, school communities and leaders, we could attempt to define teacher excellence. Education experts agree that excellent teaching results in good learning and that it is the result of dynamic, positive relationships.

In survey responses from teacher focus groups, an emerging theme was that “students are the central focus in the work that teachers do” (Canadian Education Association and Canadian Teachers’ Federation 2012, 17). Teachers and students work together to achieve their outcomes in a responsive environment that celebrates diversity and fosters mutual respect. However, when students are asked what they believe constitutes teacher excellence, motivating them as learners seems to be most frequently reported. Students crave the relational component of learning, and value teachers’ attention and the opportunity to be challenged with regard to their skills and thinking. Perhaps, then, teaching excellence is learning excellence and could be described simply as teachers creating positive learning relationships.

Excellent learners are planting the seeds for curiosity and inquiry that provide motivation for them to weather challenges in their studies. Is that not what learning is—to move beyond what one already knows and create new understandings or connections between ideas? And, along the way, to nurture one’s capacity and thirst to be a lifelong learner?

Excellent teachers embrace pedagogy that can address diverse learning needs, through planning, collaborating with colleagues, creating authentic learning activities, and providing formative assessment opportunities and reflection. They have a strong repertoire of strategies to embrace students’ strengths and recognize individual potential. Excellent teachers plan and collaborate with their students in a wise, creative and supportive manner that will generate inspiration for learning excellence.

Who’s got it right? Certainly not the Task Force for Teaching Excellence (2014), which released its 25 recommendations on teaching excellence in May. Although the report states that in deliberations “the child came first” (p 1), the recommendations put student learning at risk by systematically trying to dismantle what great leaders, excellent teachers and schools are already providing. Creating a healthy and positive school culture will not result from massive overgovernance, increased evaluation of teachers and reduced focus on instructional leadership. Let’s get it right, for student excellence.

References


Christine Harris
Notice of Motion: Name Change

The Special Education Council recommends changing the name of the council to the Council for Inclusive Education. This change reflects the mission and vision of the council, as well as current language in the field. This will be discussed and voted on at the annual general meeting on October 18, 2014, at the annual Celebrating the Challenges conference.

Notice of Positions Open on the Special Education Council Executive

The following positions will be open on the Special Education Council executive:

- Secretary
- Webmaster
- President-elect
- Conference director
- PD director

If you would like to nominate someone or are interested in running for the position, please complete the nomination form included with this issue.

All forms must be received by the day of the annual general meeting, which will be held on October 18, during the Celebrating the Challenges conference. Please forward forms to Hayley Christen, Special Education Council president, at hayley.christen@rdpsd.ab.ca.
New Resources in the ATA Library

We are happy to highlight items you can find in the ATA library that focus on special education.

Books

Inclusive Education: Examining Equity on Five Continents
Alfredo J Artiles, Elizabeth B Kozleski and Federico R Waitoller, editors
Harvard University Press, 2011
371.9046 K88

Taking a broader view than is usual in books on inclusive education, the various authors in Inclusive Education: Examining Equity on Five Continents discuss how inclusive education has been implemented in nine countries around the world. They consider approaches to inclusive education and explain how they are mediated by the official and implicit goals of public education, which vary greatly from country to country.

Simple Strategies for Teaching Children at Risk, K–5
Melissa Stormont and Cathy Newman Thomas
Corwin Press, 2014
371.92 S884

When students hit roadblocks in their learning, teachers can feel underprepared for helping those students back onto the learning path. In the practical book Simple Strategies for Teaching Children at Risk, K–5, Melissa Stormont and Cathy Newman Thomas provide teachers with insights to identify which students are at risk of hitting a roadblock and why. They also help teachers learn to build positive student–teacher relationships and to recognize when they need to pull in other professionals to assist their students.

Connecting Content and Academic Language for English Learners and Struggling Students, Grades 2–6
Ruth Swinney and Patricia Velasco
Corwin Press, 2011
372.6 S978

Academic language is usually learned through interaction with new ideas, either through conversing about things outside of daily experience or through reading books. Students who struggle with academic language often do not have the background knowledge that is expected at school. Connecting Content and Academic Language for English Learners and Struggling Students, Grades 2–6 addresses how teachers can help students bridge the gap between their social language skills and those language skills needed to participate in academic discussions.

Assistive Technology Assessment Handbook
Stefano Federici and Marcia J Scherer, editors
CRC Press, 2012
617.033 S326

The Assistive Technology Assessment Handbook gives readers a tool kit for performing assessments, describes the roles of the assessment team members, and reviews cutting-edge technologies for rehabilitation and independent living.

Personalised Learning for Young People with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties
Andrew Colley
Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2013
371.9 C967

In Personalised Learning for Young People with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties, Andrew Colley argues for a differentiated approach to instruction for students with special learning needs and explains how teachers can do that for students over the age of 14. Lots of examples and practical advice in this book!
Dyslexia-Friendly Practice in the Secondary Classroom
Tilly Mortimore and Jane Dupree
Learning Matters, 2008
371.9144 M888
Tilly Mortimore and Jane Dupree have written Dyslexia-Friendly Practice in the Secondary Classroom, a book for the novice teacher who has no experience in supporting dyslexic students in the classroom. Full of practical advice, the authors present situations the teacher is likely to encounter and provide strategies for meeting those challenges.

Helping Children with Selective Mutism and Their Parents: A Guide for School-Based Professionals
Christopher A Kearney
Oxford University Press, 2010
362.82 K24
Helping Children with Selective Mutism and Their Parents: A Guide for School-Based Professionals is an essential resource for teachers working with selectively mute children. Christopher Kearney points out the differences between adaptive mutism, selective mutism and simple shyness. He provides teachers with a step-by-step guide for supporting selectively mute children and encouraging them to verbally engage in the classroom.

Neurodiversity in the Classroom: Strength-Based Strategies to Help Students with Special Needs Succeed in School and Life
Thomas Armstrong
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2012
371.9 A738
Rather than seeing students with learning difficulties as disabled, Thomas Armstrong argues that we should see them as neurologically diverse. Changing our lens to that of diversity allows us to see the strengths and positive attributes of those who are diverse, rather than focusing on the tasks that are difficult for them.

DVD
Tying Your Own Shoes/En laçant mes souliers
Shira Avni
16 minutes
National Film Board of Canada, 2009
In the documentary film Tying Your Own Shoes, filmmaker Shira Avni uses a mix of animation and live action to present viewers with a first-hand perspective of what it feels like to be born with Down’s syndrome.
Regional Updates

Calgary

The Calgary Regional completed the school year with a technology workshop on Google Docs. Teachers, administrators and consultants from four school districts were engaged in dialogue about how technology has affected the lives of our diverse learners. Andrea Gillier, a consultant with the Calgary Catholic School District, paced participants through all the resources available through Google Docs, leaving ample time for questions and practice. The feedback was excellent, and we will repeat this session in the fall.

We increased our membership by another 25 members, which brought the new members for the school year to 75.

I would like to thank the dedicated members of the Calgary Regional for a wondrous year. We led and supported many diverse teachers through workshops and our online resources. We have begun planning next fall’s workshops, beginning with technology and moving into inclusive education. Both sessions will be presented by executive members, Kelsey Astle and Michelle Dow. We are looking forward to feedback from our survey with regard to further PD.

Michelle Dow is taking over as president of the Calgary Regional as I am stepping down.

Kathryn Soby

Central Alberta

Caroline Guilbault, a workshop facilitator with the ATA, led our book study on Teaching with the Brain in Mind, by Eric Jensen (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005). She provided an overview of the book and then had attendees study key concepts and teach them to their group members. The attendees enjoyed a great meal provided by Big Bend Market. Everyone received a copy of the book. There were two draws for registration for the Celebrating the Challenges conference to be held in October; both were won by teachers from Red Deer Public Schools.

We have one vacancy on our executive—president-elect. We are also looking for members from other school districts in our region. We have a new facilities coordinator and a new treasurer. I will remain as president.

Judy Windrim

Canadian Rockies

The Canadian Rockies Regional has been holding meetings during lunch at our district meetings, and that has been a great way for our executive to meet and stay connected to our initiatives. We are continuing to keep our costs extremely reasonable to encourage membership, and we continue to seek connections with teachers from other school districts.

Janis Bekar

Edmonton

Last November, the Edmonton Regional held a workshop on addressing learning disabilities in the inclusive classroom. For a very snowy day, we had a good turnout—29 people attended, including seven new members. We gave a portfolio to everyone in attendance.

A presentation on rethinking equity took place February 12 at the Derrick Club. This was offered free to all members and was a relaxing and informative event. Stephen Murgatroyd, coeditor of Rethinking Equity: Creating a Great School for All (Future Think Press, 2013), shared some interesting thoughts about inclusion and equity. Very thought-provoking!

Debbie Bale

Fort McMurray

The Fort McMurray Regional is currently rebuilding and is seeking like-minded members for our executive. The professional development we offered last school year included a session on exploring the Daily 5 and Daily 3 in literacy and numeracy.
Please contact me if you are interested in nominating someone or submitting your own name for a position on the executive. (See the back page for contact information.)

Lois Potvin-Gibson

South East

Last spring the South East Regional offered a three-part series on behaviour learning. In the first session, we learned about the impact of trauma on the brain. In the second session, we learned to be mindful and shared strategies for mindfulness in our classrooms. In the third session, we explored the executive functions and strategies that support building this area of the brain. People could attend one, two or all three of the sessions. Our members indicated that they enjoyed the sessions and the opportunity to win an iPad Mini. We will be holding a variety of learning series for our members in the fall.

Joanne Stockman

Excellence in Teaching Award Winner: Tania Brown

The Special Education Council would like to congratulate Tania Brown, learning lead teacher at G W Skene School in Calgary, who was a recipient of Alberta’s prestigious Excellence in Teaching Award.

Tania has worked at G W Skene School for the past 10 years. Principal Don Braun said that Tania displays excellence as an inclusionary practitioner. She teaches a Bridges class for behaviour-challenged students and has been successful in having all her Bridges students integrated in large classrooms in the school. Tania also works with a behaviour support worker, Alison Heinrick, who has assisted her in her work at the school.
Alberta Education Updates

Final Report for the EYCP

The Early Years Continuum Project (EYCP) was designed to explore how to create and sustain a comprehensive continuum of community supports for families with young children. Three Alberta communities were engaged in order to gain a better understanding of the essential qualities of family and community environments needed for healthy early childhood development; to identify needs and challenges, assets and opportunities; and to develop strategies for establishing effective continuums of services and supports for families.

The EYCP has concluded, and project sites identified six key factors for establishing effective continuums of services and supports for families: strong project management, community coordinators, evaluation support, community-controlled resources, strategic assessment/planning and actions, and adequate time.

A final report highlighting the EYCP’s successes and recommendations was developed. The recommendations included building early childhood networks and champions that exist in communities; building from the grassroots ability to self-evaluate; taking action and advocating for early childhood in the community; connecting projects focused on child development in the early years; overcoming barriers and creating opportunities for early childhood development; and continuing to invest in understanding, including research, of how children are developing in Alberta.

The findings will inform the work of the Alberta Approach to Early Childhood Development. The EYCP final report has been posted at www.successby6edmonton.info/storage/EYCP-FinalReport-March2014.pdf. For more information on the project, visit www.successby6edmonton.info.

For further information, please contact Kelly Hennig, education manager, School Accreditation and Standards Branch, Alberta Education, at kelly.hennig@gov.ab.ca or 780-427-3429. Dial 310-0000 first for toll-free access in Alberta.

IPP Templates: Going Forward into 2014/15

To support the new Education Act, ministry work is under way to align corresponding regulations, ministerial orders (including the Standards for Special Education [Alberta Education, 2004]) and other related policies.

As a result, sample individualized program plan (IPP) templates were made available on LearnAlberta.ca last October (www.learnalberta.ca/content/ieptLibrary/lib07.html). These templates are a resource for helping the education system transition to meet the expectations of the Education Act and related regulations in 2015. The templates will fulfill the current requirements related to IPPs, as outlined in the Standards for Special Education, and will reflect the shifts in thinking and practice articulated in the Inspiring Education initiative.

Over the past several months, Alberta Education has collected feedback on the templates. A provincial IPP discussion was held in February, and participant feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Participants commented on the value of the Inclusive Education Library (www.learnalberta.ca/content/ieptLibrary/) and how it contains templates and information that support teachers in ensuring that they can provide meaningful instruction for every student. The templates were viewed as useful and reflective of Inspiring Education principles. Many participants also commented that the templates reflect jurisdictional philosophy on inclusion and are supportive of the shifts in thinking and practice they are working toward. The feedback is being used to make minor enhancements, and the revised templates will be posted for schools to use in the coming year.
During this time of transformational change, educators will continue to develop new ways to respond to the learning needs of each and every student. The ministry recognizes the importance of providing teachers with information and resources that support learning for all students in the classroom. Teachers will continue to identify and respond to the educational needs of individual students who require additional supports to be successful learners. A guiding principle of Inspiring Education is inclusive, equitable access. To ensure that individual learners receive the instructional supports they need in order to be successful, it is critical that there be a plan in place that identifies the student’s specific learning needs and the school’s commitment to meet those needs. The IPP templates are available for this purpose, to assist teachers and others who support learner success.

For further information, please contact Leah Dushenski, senior manager, School Accreditation and Standards Branch, Alberta Education, at leah.dushenski@gov.ab.ca or 780-427-6894. Dial 310-0000 first for toll-free access in Alberta.

**New Curriculum Redesign Tools Available Online**

In 2009, as part of the Inspiring Education dialogue, Albertans said that every student in Alberta should benefit from an engaging, relevant and personalized learning experience. The Curriculum Redesign initiative is building on the success of our current education system and the many innovative educational practices already under way in schools to make the vision of Inspiring Education a reality for all students. In support of this, there is an opportunity to create curriculum that is more responsive to the many different ways in which students learn and to better prepare them for tomorrow’s challenges.

Available on Alberta Education’s website are new tools that highlight the benefits of redesigned curriculum for teachers (http://education.alberta.ca/media/8448868/newprogramsstudy-teacherbenefits.pdf) and for students (http://education.alberta.ca/media/8448875/newprogramsstudy-studentbenefits.pdf), as well as Curriculum Redesign At-a-Glance (http://education.alberta.ca/media/8455813/cr%20at%20a%20glance-27mar2014.pdf). Updates on Curriculum Redesign and tools to help you engage in conversation with your colleagues and community about the directions for future curriculum are available on the Curriculum Redesign website (http://education.alberta.ca/department/ipr/curriculum.aspx).

For further information, please contact Merla Bolender, executive director of programs of study and resources, Education Program Standards and Assessment Division, Alberta Education, at merla.bolender@gov.ab.ca or 780-644-2530. Dial 310-0000 first for toll-free access in Alberta.
Book Review

Rethinking Equity: Creating a Great School for All
edited by Stephen Murgatroyd and J-C Couture
Future Think Press, 2013

Equity is not simply about equal access to opportunities; it is ensuring that every child has the opportunity to succeed at their own level.
—Stephen Murgatroyd

Special Education Council members had the opportunity to read the book Rethinking Equity: Creating a Great School for All, coedited by Stephen Murgatroyd and J-C Couture, when the ATA mailed out free copies this year. The editors and the chapter authors discuss the history of Alberta’s equity journey and make reference to the current context of inclusion practices in the province. Also included is an understanding of Finland’s inclusion and equity successes, as well as an awareness of the sociocultural, political and economic factors that affect our educational system.

Council members also had opportunities in Edmonton, Calgary and Red Deer to attend an evening discussion with Stephen Murgatroyd on rethinking equity. Murgatroyd has also created a video, Rethinking Equity—The Critical Driver of Educational Policy. This video is based on material from the book and speaks to the contrast between the two competing frameworks for school systems in the future: the GERM (Global Educational Reform Movement) model (which is driven by competition, choice, accountability, fewer curriculum options and testing) and the equity model (which focuses on equity as a driving factor and offers a broader curriculum, creativity and innovation, smart assessment, and support for lifelong learning).

The book and the video challenge us to look closely at what equity is and how equity should be the major driver of public policy in education. In the book’s foreword, J-C Couture challenges us to think about how we can create inclusive environments to make a great school for all students. The contributions of the chapter authors lead us to reflect on how we must rethink equity and provide insight into both the concerns...
Murgatroyd points out that we now have a majority of students in our education system who are coded. He poses the question of how we can include those children in an inclusive system that is good for everyone. In an equity system, the needs of inclusion are well met as they are designed around the needs of the students and create opportunities for students to succeed at their own level.

The book also offers readers background information on the history of Alberta’s equity journey and the confusion about what inclusion really means. Concerns are raised about the available funding to provide equity in schools. There is also hope that future consideration will be given to how we can improve equity for students through broader funding frameworks to support the growing needs of students with intensive needs in classrooms.

Also highlighted are comparisons between inclusion practices in Finland and in Alberta. Some parallels between the systems are local decision making, shared school leadership and student voice. A notable difference is in the use of testing, as Finland relies on teachers to test students until after high school, instead of using standardized testing.

In terms of special education, Alberta uses a coding model to identify students with special needs, based on a set of criteria and on assessment. Students with severe needs have special funding, with the rest of the funding reserved for other students in need, determined by schools and school boards.

Finland uses a tiered model to determine support. Tier 1 offers support to all students in the classroom, and Tier 2 consists of remedial support from the teacher and special educator. Tier 3 is considered special support and can range from general education to a special school placement. All students must have an IPP in Tier 3. Tier 2 support is very popular, with the service of a special education teacher being available for support in classrooms or with small groups with regard to planning, assessment or coteaching. This support is available to all students and does not require coding.

There are some similarities and some differences between Alberta and Finland with regard to special education services, but it is hard to compare the two systems, given the socioeconomic differences between Alberta and Finland.

Overall, this book was a very interesting read. It offers a comprehensive understanding of inclusionary practices and the equity journey in Alberta. It also provides insight into the Finland school system, which has gained significant attention from school policy-makers in Alberta. Stephen Murgatroyd and J-C Couture give readers much food for thought on the challenges of defining education policy to create a great school for all.

Kelly Huck
Curriculum Redesign

If we look to the familiar Canadian corporation Tim Hortons, we see a business that has cornered a particular market. As we drive past its stores on the streets of our town, we might comment, “What a gold mine, to have that franchise!” Yes, Tim Hortons dominates the coffee market, yet the company is still making changes. Why fix it if it ain’t broke? The company realizes that it must be innovative in the highly competitive coffee market if it is to remain Canada’s coffee favourite. It sees that there are challengers to its dominance and that if it doesn’t continue to innovate, it may be left behind.

In Alberta we have a highly regarded education system that meets the needs of our current students. But we must remember that we also need to meet the needs of future students and prepare them for challenges and opportunities in the wider global community. Listening to Albertans, the government heard that although our education system is excellent, we need to continue to evaluate what we are doing in order to remain world-class.

In Alberta Education, this took the form of the Curriculum Redesign initiative, which was undertaken because stakeholders pointed out that we must continue to change. These stakeholders began to come together in 2008, when then minister of education Dave Hancock struck a steering committee to create a long-term vision for education in Alberta. Processes to engage the public included personal conversations, regional community conversations, local conversations, a provincial forum and ongoing online discussion.

Based on these meetings, the discussions and the dialogue, the steering committee’s report—Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans (Alberta Education 2010)—was completed.

The report indicates that around the world there is an emphasis on educational change and on a knowledge-based economy, rather than an industrial economy. This information led to the passing of the Ministerial Order on Student Learning, and now we are to work together to improve our education system.

To prepare our students, Alberta Education has stated,

New curriculum will build on a foundation of literacy and numeracy and support the development of cross-curricular competencies for living, learning and working in the 21st century. It will support students in becoming the educated Albertans that the people of the province envision: Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit.

The ministerial order, which came into effect in May 2013, provides more information on this, but what does this mean for teachers who work with students who have learning challenges?

The focus on numeracy and literacy skills will make a lot of sense to teachers. The draft benchmarks, found in Appendix F of the Curriculum Development Prototyping Guide (Alberta Education 2013), are organized by the categories awareness, knowledge and understanding, and strategies. These are expectations across various contexts and for five developmentally appropriate age groups. It is not just the kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers, or the resource teachers, who will be responsible for literacy and numeracy development. All teachers, in all subject areas, will have the opportunity to support student learning in the areas of literacy and numeracy.

Ten multidisciplinary competencies are detailed in the ministerial order:

- Think critically
- Know how to learn
- Identify and solve complex problems
- Manage information
- Innovate
- Create opportunities
- Apply multiple literacies
- Demonstrate good communication skills
- Demonstrate global and cultural understanding
- Identify and apply career and life skills

These competencies, too, are the responsibility of all teachers, across all grades.
and subjects. For those of us who have traditionally worked with students who have learning challenges, the competencies will not seem unusual. If we examine even just the first two competencies, we see that we are to support students in using multiple approaches to solve problems and to help them access a variety of resources in arriving at solutions. We are to help students recognize mistakes as an opportunity to learn, and to encourage them as they demonstrate resiliency and perseverance.

None of this is a stretch for those of us involved in inclusive education today. Our next challenge will be determining how we are to assess the competencies. Learning support and inclusive education teachers have long said that we should not operate under the unquestioned assumption that improved test scores are clear evidence of an excellent education. These are the teachers who use assessment to inform their teaching practice. Curriculum Redesign will recognize what many teachers already know and have been doing.

The Southern Alberta Professional Development Consortium (SAPDC) and the PD consortia partners across the province have been working together to develop workshops and materials to support teacher professional learning in the area of Curriculum Redesign. For more information, please contact your consortium (www.arpdc.ab.ca).

Notes

References

The Learning Facilitators
Southern Alberta Professional Development Consortium
Differentiating Instruction: 10 No-Fuss Strategies for Inclusive Classrooms

Many teachers believe that differentiated instruction is complex, time-consuming and necessary for only a few learners. In this short article, I share 10 ideas that are not only easy to implement but effective for many students in the diverse classroom, including students without disabilities.

1. Create a Comfortable Classroom

Many teachers think about differentiation as something related only to lesson design, but there are also many ways to meet diverse student needs by simply changing the classroom environment. For some students, lessons are a challenge to access, not because they don’t have the necessary skills or knowledge, but because they are not comfortable. Try offering seating options (for example, at tables or desks; on the floor; or on chairs, beanbags or seat cushions) when possible. You can also adjust the lighting by sitting some students closer to natural light or by using lamp lighting in certain spaces.

2. Employ Elastic Frameworks

Need your classroom to s-t-r-e-t-c-h a bit to meet the needs of all your students? To bring your inclusive classroom to the next level, try using structures with a bit more “give.”

Kelly Chandler-Olcott (2003) has written about what she calls “elastic” instructional frameworks: models and methods of instruction that stretch to accommodate diverse learning needs without requiring students to be labelled or segregated from each other. Such frameworks allow students who are very accomplished or experienced with a competency or content area to develop skills at increasingly higher levels, while simultaneously allowing students who lack certain skills or experiences to acquire them at their own pace.

Without a range of such structures in their repertoire, teachers often end up teaching to the perceived middle of their classes, thereby failing to support or to challenge a large number of students who don’t fit that profile. Structures that don’t stretch much—whole-class oral reading of a single text, for example—have the potential to be disastrous for students with disabilities, because many of these students present skills that would be located on the outskirts of a developmental continuum. For this reason, rigid, one-size-fits-all structures are likely to frustrate or bore students with unique learning profiles, and they often do not work well for students without disabilities either. Elastic frameworks that do seem to fit well for a wide range of learners include guided reading, computer-based instruction/web quests, inquiry-based learning, drama, lab, service learning and writers’ workshop.

3. Find 20 Ways

How can you make the science lab more accessible for students with disabilities or for other learners who struggle with the academic, literacy or social requirements of the tasks? You can create and post a video online for students who need repeated exposure to the material, you can give different students different roles, or you can allow some students to use digital voice recorders so they can speak instead of write their observations. All of these are part of a 20 Ways list I made to support diverse learners in the lab (www.paulakluth.com/readings/differentiating-instruction/20-ways-to-adapt-the-science-lab/).

These 20 Ways lists don’t take much time to create, but they can be used repeatedly, and many will be relevant across departments and grade levels. To try your hand at differentiating using this technique, gather a few colleagues and brainstorm a variety of ways to provide more “entry points” into a particular activity (for example, journal writing, debate club). Your team may not use every idea or even refer to the
list much; the process of brainstorming options is often more powerful than the product you will create.

4. Mix Up Your Groupings

Throughout the days, the weeks, the months and the year, a wide range of groupings should be used in every classroom. Regularly assemble students into pairs, trios, and larger constellations of four and five.

During some lessons, you may choose to group students with similar goals, interests, needs or skills together. During other lessons, group students with different goals, interests, needs or skills, in order to give students a chance to teach and learn from one another.

5. Give Plenty of Choices

Let students differentiate for themselves. Give them as many choices as reasonably possible throughout the school year. Choice can be built into almost any part of the school day. Students can choose which assessments to complete during a unit, which problems to solve on their homework page, which books to read from a recommended list, or to work alone or with a group during a project.

6. Teach with Tech

Adapting different books for different learners once meant a lot of cutting, pasting, erasing and highlighting. Today, differentiating literature selections can be done with the click of a mouse by scanning books into PowerPoint presentations, using free programs and websites, or supplying learners with e-readers. Using tools such as these, key words can be highlighted, text can be enlarged, and—with some devices and programs—text can be converted to speech.

Much of the technology that can help educators differentiate is no or low cost. For instance, Microsoft Word contains many tools that can help diverse learners write, read and learn with more ease. Text can be translated into a number of languages, grammar can be taught and corrected, and the background colours of documents can be changed on screen to support learners with certain vision problems (such as eye fatigue).

7. Put It on the Agenda

A learning agenda is a customized list of activities that must be completed during a specific period of time. Everyone in the class may be working on their agendas, but not all students will have the same work to do. Typically, students work independently on agendas, collaborating when necessary.

In one classroom, all students had learning agendas related to independent reading. All learners had to read a biography, a mystery and a poetry book. Students also had items on their agendas specifically chosen for them. One learner was assigned to read two nonfiction selections related to soccer, an area of interest for him. Another was required to read one book in Spanish, a language he was mastering.

8. Set Up Stations

Using stations involves setting up different spots in the classroom where students work on various tasks simultaneously. The focus of one station might be group problem solving. Skill practice might be the objective of another station. A third station could involve a teacher introducing a new concept to small groups of learners.

Station teaching can accommodate student choice of activity, thus catering to individual interests and strengths. Stations also create smaller working groups within a classroom, which can be less intimidating than a whole-group setting for some students. This kind of pedagogy also allows educators to personalize content and instruction for students, perhaps even addressing a learner’s IEP objectives, since all students do not need to complete the same tasks. Centres or stations are also ideal for use in the inclusive classroom since they allow teachers to work with individual students or small groups of learners without having to use a more restrictive pullout model of instruction, especially if you are using a coteaching model. For example, one educator can be facilitating the entire class as they move through the rotations, while the other educator can be checking in with...
those learners needing enrichment questions, materials or instruction.

9. Plan Projects

Project-based instruction is especially appropriate for students with diverse learning profiles, as many student needs can be addressed, there are increased opportunities for peer support and a number of disciplines can be addressed. Making a film, for instance, can involve many different students in many different roles (for example, director, producer, screenwriter).

In managing projects, teachers should set clear timelines, teach students how to chart their own progress and develop progress reports, and help students to produce a final product. To create the best possible outcomes, steer students away from projects that involve passive learning and point them toward those activities that will inspire higher-order thinking and meaningful engagement. For instance, instead of asking for a report, challenge students to design a model or produce a mural.

10. Teach to Fascinations

Teaching to interests is a fairly simple strategy and one that can buy you not only student engagement but also trust and connection in the classroom. For instance, Tamar, a young woman with a love of Amelia Earhart, embraced any lesson related to the celebrated heroine. Her middle school teacher knew this and used Tamar’s fascination to enchant her into learning new content, engaging in more challenging work and making connections with peers. Tamar was typically reluctant to learn new content in math, so her teacher would integrate airplanes or Amelia Earhart into the curriculum, instruction or educational materials. For example, distance-rate-time word problems featured Earhart and her various planes. In language arts, she could be coaxed into more sophisticated reading selections if they included stories or facts about aviators.

Teaching to fascinations is a differentiation technique that might be overlooked because educators may not initially see how they can use a specific interest in their teaching. With a bit of thought and creativity, however, clever teachers prevail—as in the case of the student who was fascinated by the GPS in his mother’s car. His teacher taught him to read using the system’s manual.

Reference


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