

# Creating Schools in Which All Students Can Succeed



**by Marilyn Friend and Kimberly L. Pope**

*By examining their own beliefs about teaching and student learning, recognizing the value of collaboration, and basing their instruction on differentiation, teachers can ensure that all their students achieve success.*

**T**oday's classrooms are a reflection of today's society; and more than anything else, they can be characterized as diverse. Every day, new students arrive at school who speak a language unknown in the community, who are recent

immigrants to the United States, who are struggling to learn because of stresses in their lives outside of school, or who have identified disabilities that necessitate special education and classroom accommodations.

Teachers have embraced the challenges of meeting students' wide range of needs, but often wonder how to best go about this task. They are looking for ideas to help them simultaneously teach students who excel, those who learn at an average pace, and those who struggle to learn (Walther-Thomas and Brownell 2001). Clearly, no simple answers exist. Helpful, however, is focusing on fundamental principles for creating and sustaining classrooms in which all students can achieve. Particularly in this era of No Child Left Behind with its emphasis on high-

stakes testing and professional accountability, teachers need to consider (a) their own beliefs about their responsibilities for teaching and student learning, (b) the crucial role collaboration plays in contemporary schools that are accomplishing their goals, and (c) efficient strategies for differentiating instruction.

### What Do You Believe?

Discussions of teacher beliefs sometimes seem trite and unnecessary, but self-reflection and an honest assessment of the scripts each of us carries in our heads about who can learn, what they can learn, and how they can be taught are more important than ever. Have you or a colleague ever made statements like these?

- *Chien doesn't speak much English. He really should be in a bilingual class all day, but he only gets an hour of services.*
- *James should be on medication, but his parents won't even consider it. He bounces around the classroom and usually doesn't know what he's supposed to be doing.*
- *Olivia is not a behavior problem, but for all practical purposes she's a nonreader. She's not getting much out of being placed in my class, and I'm just not sure that inclusion is right for a student like her.*

These common teacher reactions to teaching diverse groups of students are understandable, but they also are very telling. If teachers wish someone else would teach certain students, or if they express the belief that some students are incapable of succeeding in the

class, what is the likelihood that they are continuing to problem solve to help these students succeed? The issue is not about not caring—teachers truly care about their students. It is about setting expectations and working from a perspective of optimism and possibilities rather than one of pessimism and problems (Obiakor 1999). Les Brown, an internationally acclaimed speaker who grew up in poverty, was labeled as mildly

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mentally retarded, and spent most of his school years in a special education classroom, captures this concept when he addresses educators. He urges teachers to take a stand for their students who cannot stand up for themselves and admonishes them, “You’ve got to believe.” His words should be taken to heart by every educator, no matter how challenging the students, how scarce the resources, or how difficult the curriculum.

One of the most important beliefs to consider concerns *inclusion*—an overused word often not clearly defined. How do you define inclusion? Does the term represent to you the idea of students with disabilities being placed in general education classrooms? Though inclusion often is related to students

with disabilities and in many cases is applied to where students sit, it is much more than that. It is the foundation on which classrooms for all students should be based.

Inclusion is a belief system. It is the understanding that *all* students—those who are academically gifted, those who are average learners, and those who struggle to learn for any reason—should be fully welcomed members of their school communities and that all professionals in a school share responsibility for their learning. The term inclusion only has meaning when it is applied to an entire school because this belief system cannot be made into a reality when it only is applied to individual students (“Ethan is an inclusion student, but Anthony is not”), teachers (“Ms. Martinez is the inclusion teacher this year—she goes to four different classrooms”), or classrooms and teams (“Mr. Carlson has the third grade inclusion class” or “I’m on the seventh grade inclusion team”).

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**Marilyn Friend** is Professor and Chair, Department of Specialized Education Services, University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her areas of expertise include collaboration, inclusive practices, and co-teaching. She is the author (with Lynne Cook) of *Interactions: Collaboration Skills for School Professionals*.

**Kimberly L. Pope** is a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She is pursuing a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis on special education. Her research interests include professional and family collaboration specifically with special education. She is a member of the Sigma Gamma Chapter of Kappa Delta Pi.

Though where students sit is a consideration in inclusive schools, the sense of responsibility is the primary concern. Teachers in inclusive schools do not think about or talk in terms of “my kids and your kids” when they refer to students who receive some type of special service. They are committed to students being educated with their peers and fret when they learn that some students appropriately need to spend time outside their classrooms. They firmly believe that all students should access the curriculum taught in the classroom, and they presume that their job is to make this happen.

Teaching is a complex profession, and every teacher has days when the demands of the classroom are overwhelming. It is teachers’ beliefs about their ability to find a way to help every student learn and a conviction that they can make a positive difference in each student’s life that gets them through the difficult times and causes them to keep looking for new answers and options.

### How Can You Share the Responsibility?

The second component of teaching diverse groups of students—the extent to which teachers embrace and implement collaborative practices—is just as important as the first. Do you believe in collaboration? Usually, there is only one right answer to that question: “Of course!” But an affirmative answer carries with it a tremendous responsibility; just having two people assigned to work together does not automatically result in collaboration (Friend 2000). Working collaboratively takes more time than working alone. It requires that all partici-

pants recognize that they may have to set aside their own preferences as they work with others who think differently; and it involves sharing key decisions, the work involved in teaching, and the accountability for results (Friend and Cook 2003).

Despite these challenges, collaboration is a key ingredient for teaching diverse student groups. It refers to the *style* that professionals use to interact with one another—a style based on valuing one another’s contribution, trust and respect, and sharing the workload (Friend and Cook 2003). Collaboration can occur when all the teachers at an elementary grade school pool their resources to create a classroom library of reading materials across a wide range of reading levels. It also takes place when middle school teachers decide to standardize the way they require students to head their papers and turn in their assignments so that students need to remember only a single system. It also happens when a bilingual teacher and a general education teacher can look at a lesson, decide which elements of it are appropriate for certain students, and create a rubric for grading those students’ work (Bahamonde and Friend 1999). Collaboration also can involve other school staff members and situations. Principals can engage teachers in collaborative efforts to increase parent involvement in school activities, or to restructure programs and services to make the school more inclusive. Teachers may collaborate with paraprofessionals, as appropriate, to brainstorm a way to help a struggling student to organize his materials or to find a more efficient way to transition students from one activity to another.

One example of collaboration in inclusive schools that currently is receiving considerable attention is co-teaching. *Co-teaching* is the service delivery option for students with disabilities as well as those in bilingual or related programs, and those in programs for students who are gifted, in which two teachers share instructional responsibility for all or part of the school day. It is a true instructional partnership. Sound easy? Even many experienced co-teachers have found that the collaboration of co-teaching takes considerable time and effort. For example, in some classrooms, teachers sometimes have difficulty giving up the lead role, and they inadvertently relegate their colleagues to work more as teaching assistants than teachers. In others, the professionals disagree on how to address classroom matters such as discipline or grading, and they have to resolve these areas of conflict.

The positive outcomes of co-teaching are many (Friend and Cook 2003). For students, co-teaching can reduce the stigma sometimes associated with leaving the classroom for special instruction. At the middle- and high-school levels, co-teaching may allow students with disabilities the option of taking more electives and feeling more connected with peers because special services are embedded in core academic classes instead of occurring in addition to those classes. For teachers, professionals are able to blend their differing resources and knowledge, lower the student-teacher ratio, and intensify instruction. Co-teaching also provides a sense of camaraderie between the participating teachers. Teachers share the joys of their work, and they can solve problems constructively when an issue arises.

Clearly, the benefits of collaboration far outweigh the challenges when working with diverse student groups. Instead of each teacher trying to create all the materials and find all the solutions to all students' needs, teachers can share their responsibilities; and more can be accomplished as a strong, positive network is formed. In some schools, teachers are using technology to foster their collaboration. They use e-mail when they cannot get face-to-face shared planning time; and they file their teaching ideas by grade level, subject, and unit on their schools' servers for others to access. Educators *must* pull together by sharing their work through collaboration; too much knowledge and too many skills are needed for any single professional to keep up with and master all of them.

### What Are Your Classroom Practices?

Following a careful assessment of your beliefs about students and their learning and a commitment to collaborative practices as a means of making teaching diverse students more feasible, the day-to-day practicalities of adjusting instruction can be addressed. The basis for thinking about instruction comes from the notion of universal design for learning (UDL), a concept that originated in the field of architecture and that was applied to education in the early 1990s through work completed at the Center for Applied Special Technology (Hitchcock et al. 2002). Think about buildings in your community: Do some have ramps that were installed long after the building was erected? The ramps may be functional, but are not

well integrated into the building design. Contrast those buildings with ones in which ramps were included in the original design. These ramps are functional, too, but they are integrated seamlessly into the structure. UDL applies this idea to curriculum and instruction. A universally designed curriculum has built-in flexibility and options for all learners from the beginning—at the planning

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stage—and this leads to more elegant, integrated, and seamless educational opportunities.

The application of UDL that teachers can use daily is differentiation. A considerable body of research has demonstrated that the extent to which teachers differentiate—that is, the ways in which they adjust instruction to help students learn information, remember it, and demonstrate that they have learned it—strongly affects the achievement of their students (Gregory and Chapman 2002). Differentiating is not creating individual lesson plans for each student, nor does it mean that students never work in a large group. Instead, it is a way of thinking

about teaching and learning based on the understanding that, because all students are different, classrooms need many options to facilitate student learning (Heacox 2002). Differentiated instruction promotes a rigorous curriculum for all students with varying levels of teacher support, task expectations, and methods for learning based on the students' abilities and interests. Through differentiated instruction, students have choices about how and what they learn by participating in setting learning goals and making the classroom connect with their experiences and interests (Tomlinson 2000a; 2000b).

Many schemes for differentiating have been presented in the professional literature (e.g., Gregory and Chapman 2002; Heacox 2002), but here is a straightforward set of domains to consider and some questions to guide your thinking:

- **The instructional content.** Though curriculum standards generally have been well articulated and many teachers sense they have little choice related to content, sometimes they do. For some key concepts (e.g., genres of literature), can students select from among several materials to learn the concept? Do some students already know the competencies; and if so, how can they be challenged to learn alternative content or the same content at a higher level (Troxcclair 2000)? How often do students have opportunities to learn essential competencies by exploring their own interests?
- **The learning environment.** Are there areas in the classroom in which students can work without being distracted by bulletin board displays or

holiday decorations? Does the class have several desk carrels for students who need privacy as they work? Are materials written at various levels available? Is classroom furniture used flexibly—for example, desks sometimes grouped for student interactions but at other times separated so that distractible students can attend to large-group instruction?

- **The teaching strategies.** Does instruction occur using multiple grouping strategies, including whole group, small group, individual, and teacher-student conference? When using whole-group instruction, do teachers use visual cues such as concept maps and scaffolds? Do they incorporate music, movement, and a variety of media to communicate key concepts? Do they ask questions across a variety of levels, ensuring that they call on all students and ask students questions that are designed for their learning level?
- **The learning options.** When assignments are given, how do students have opportunities to learn the information? To what extent are group participation strategies such as Think-Pair-Share, Numbered Heads Together, and choral responding used to engage students? How many options do students have for completing a project? Do the options tap students' varying strengths, including visual (creating a poster), auditory (doing an interview or oral report), kinesthetic (creating a skit or an interpretive dance), and others? To what extent do students, particu-

larly those in the upper grades, have several options for completing homework and long-term assignments?

- **Evaluation of student work.** Do students help to create grading rubrics, and do they understand these rubrics? Are multiple means used to evaluate student learning, including traditional tests as well as performance assessment and authentic assessment such as portfolios?
- **Adult resources.** In every aspect in which differentiation can occur, how are colleagues, paraprofessionals, and volunteers sought to expand student learning opportunities?

### Moving from Concepts to Practice

Differentiation sounds like a great idea; but when you think about all the possibilities, it can be a little overwhelming. One starting point is to let students' skill levels related to a particular concept dictate where instruction will begin rather than relying on a curriculum or textbook guide (Gray and Waggoner 2002). This means that while all students may receive a small amount of introductory large-group instruction, their initial assignments reflect their interests and diverse levels of learning. As they progress through a unit of instruction, they have more than one way to demonstrate that they have mastered key concepts.

The INCLUDE strategy (Friend and Bursuck 2002) can guide you as you begin to differentiate and then refine your ideas. It is a systematic way to treat each student as a unique individual whose strengths should be considered along with his or her needs. The

steps in the INCLUDE strategy are these:

Identify classroom demands. Note students' strengths and needs.

Check potential areas of student success.

Look for potential problem areas.

Use information to brainstorm accommodations.

Decide which accommodations to implement.

Evaluate students' progress.

If the areas for differentiating described earlier are combined with the INCLUDE steps, the results can be spectacular. Consider these strategies that teachers implemented for their students:

- Jim, a student with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, was struggling during large-group instruction. Mrs. Jacobs provided him with an outline of lecture notes so that he could focus during English. She then began providing outlines for all students who seemed to have trouble taking notes and found that her students were more engaged and focused during class.
- Mr. Jeeter provided Jose, a Spanish-speaking student, a preview of vocabulary words a week before beginning a new science lesson so that he would have time to become familiar with the pronunciation of the terms and their meanings. He later discovered that by providing the same list to the struggling readers in his science class, they were much more confident about answering in class and volunteering to read aloud.
- Ms. Anderson and Mr. Panosh co-teach. When they were cre-

ating a project for students, they decided that having students create a magazine or newsletter would be appropriate. Students who were academically gifted studied graphic design and the publishing process (Kapusnick and Hauslein 2001), average students created magazines with articles they prepared using publishing software, and some students' magazines included many pictures and little text. All students completed the same assignment, but at many different levels.

These examples demonstrate that relatively small changes can make big differences for students. Not only can students succeed, but their motivation also is likely to increase as they experience success.

A word of caution: To fully realize the potential of differentiation, administrators have to be supportive (Tomlinson 2000a). For example, for differentiation to become a standard practice, administrators (especially principals) need to be well informed. Teachers often express concern that their principals encourage them to implement new practices, but do not have enough knowledge to help such practices grow beyond an initial level. Further, teachers need the opportunity to attend professional development on the topic, receive coaching on their efforts, and visit teachers who have been using this approach so that they can see how it is implemented and ask questions about it. Principals are instrumental in arranging these activities and in addressing challenges that may arise. They also can field some of the questions that parents and families may have concerning these practices, and

they can help to publicize the success teachers and their students experience (Walther-Thomas and Brownell 2001). Perhaps most importantly, administrators have the responsibility to assist teachers to find time to meet, plan, and evaluate their efforts (Kapusnick and Hauslein 2001).

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### Closing Thoughts

Contemporary schools are obligated to provide a high quality education for *all* students who walk through their doors, and teachers are becoming increasingly skilled at meeting this challenge. By examining their beliefs about students, teaching, and learning; recognizing the value of collaboration; and basing their instruction on differentiation, teachers can ensure that their students achieve success.

Some additional thoughts should be kept in mind. First, sometimes the most successful way to go about changing is to do so in small increments, perhaps trying to change the way you teach one unit or one type of activity. Second, find colleagues with whom to share your efforts. You are more

likely to continue your efforts when you are doing so in partnership with others. Third, set goals for yourself and celebrate when you accomplish them. Too often in schools, professionals fail to take the time to recognize their accomplishments. Finally, remember that working on differentiation is a clear example of lifelong learning. With each new student who enters the classroom and each new school year, a need will exist for yet more teaching and learning innovations. This is not a negative. It is a characteristic of the rapidly changing era in which we live.

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