

Embracing Cognitive Diversity: The Blessings Abound

An Imaginary School Trip

Picture a group of 40 students who have gone on a school trip to the Rocky Mountains. The students are divided into small groups with each going on their own unique adventure. One group hikes to a beautiful lake where they find a stunning display of alpine wildflowers in an isolated meadow. Another tries their hand at whitewater rafting and are guided through a thrilling stretch of frothing rapids. The next group learns the basics of technique and safety involved in rock climbing, while yet another group hikes to the top of a 14,000-foot peak and is treated to breathtaking views of hundreds of square miles.

At the evening campfire, each group shares their experience of the mountains that day. The mountain lake hikers speak of the striking beauty of the variety of elegant and boldly colored flowers arrayed by the thousands. The rafters tell of the raw power of the raging torrent, the skill of the guide, and the thrill of completing the white-knuckled run down the river. The rock climbers describe the difficulty and challenges of climbing a vertical rockface and the necessity of learning to trust the safety ropes controlled by their partners. Those who hiked to the summit express feeling desperately small while at the same time exhilarated by the breathtaking views.

The mountains are simply so vast and full of variety that only by listening to each other could the students attain a full appreciation of the beauty and inspiration to be found within those mountains. As each group shares their story, a more complete view of the mountains unfolds.

So it is with humanity. If one wants to develop a more complete and more accurate picture of what a human being is and what we are collectively capable of, there is no replacement for hearing the stories and understanding the perspectives of how each individual is experiencing the challenges, joys, and journey of life. As varied and vast as the mountains are, they dim in comparison to the panoply and complexities of the wide array of the human experience. Our formation and education is deeply enriched by learning from each other.



Educators and leaders have begun to grasp the powerful contribution that embracing the gift of human diversity can make to the education of students. By providing environments where socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic differences can flourish and be appreciated, schools provide a richer experience that better prepares their students for both their next level of education as well as life beyond the school. The kinds of diversity we often think of – gender, race, ethnicities – typically make the headlines as the world comes to learn the value of broadening the perspectives and backgrounds of the teams in which we work.

But an often overlooked aspect of the topic – cognitive diversity – is starting to emerge as a powerful tool for organizational growth and improvement. This is especially true of Catholic schools.

In recent decades, an increasing number of Catholic schools are learning that cognitive diversity makes rich contributions to the quality of the education students experience at their schools. Driven by a growing understanding of the techniques developed for differentiated instruction and assessment, an increasing number of parents are seeking, and rightfully expecting to find, Catholic schools that can accommodate students with learning disabilities as well as those with physical disabilities. Practitioners in Catholic schools tell of unimagined growth and blessings as more accommodations are made within the sphere of Catholic schools. The embracing of cognitive diversity represents the full blossoming of the fruits of society's slow but steady advance in building upon human diversity and the many forms it takes.

The Witness of Church Thinking and Leaders

It was Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Catholic priest and prolific author, who began to set the public tone of the current thinking and practice in Catholic circles. After teaching at academic institutions including the University of Notre Dame and Harvard Divinity School, Nouwen went on to work with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities at the L'Arche Daybreak community in Ontario where he would spend the last ten years of his life. While at Daybreak, Nouwen was paired with Adam Arnett, a resident at L'Arche Daybreak with developmental disabilities. Nouwen wrote about his relationship with Arnett in a book entitled *Adam: God's Beloved*. Foreshadowing today's experience of students and teachers at schools that embrace the opportunity to work with students with a variety of disabilities, Nouwen wrote, "It is I, not Adam, who gets the main benefit from our friendship."

Strains of Nouwen's thinking on the matter have emerged years later in the ubiquitous *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools*. In its section subtitled "Accessible to All Students" the authors write: "*Catholic schools, in concert with the Catholic community, should do everything in their power to manage available resources and seek innovative options to ensure that Catholic school education is geographically, programmatically, physically, and financially accessible.*" For our discussion here, the operative word in this statement is **programmatically**. **Effective Catholic secondary and elementary schools are those that make intentional efforts to grow their program of curricular and co-curricular activities in a way that provides accessibility to the growth and formation of all students, regardless of the nature of their physical and intellectual gifts.**

Generating Financial Support

It is the experience of many school leaders and advancement professionals that raising money to support the instructional and physical needs of students with disabilities motivates and inspires donors. Benefactors of the school quickly understand and embrace the challenge of parents of a student with a learning disability who is not allowed to attend the same Catholic school that their other children attended. We instinctively know this is wrong and unjust. A Church and a Faith that begins its worship by singing songs such as "All Are Welcome" cannot stand by and neglect the call of our *National Standards* to "do everything in their power to ensure that Catholic education is ... programmatically accessible."

Benefactors get this. It speaks to people's hearts. The issue of addressing injustices to students with disabilities normally finds numerous highly motivated advocates. Many fundraisers report anecdotally, "*That was the easiest money we ever raised.*"

Increased Enrollment

Revenue is also generated from the additional students who are often attracted to schools that have embraced cognitive diversity. School leaders quickly learn that there is a well-connected community of families who have students with learning and physical disabilities that form a network. As accommodations for students with disabilities are made, word spreads quickly within the network. Parents, desperately wanting to immerse their sons and daughters in a Catholic school environment, keenly understand the need for a supporting program of faith-based spiritual formation that accompanies the education of their children.

"You don't think your way into a new kind of living.
You live your way into a new kind of thinking."

~ Henri Nouwen



Pandemic Leads to Growing Demand for Differentiated Instruction

An article of this limited size is incapable of covering all of the issues that continue to emerge as a Catholic school grows in its ability to embrace and accept the blessings and benefits of growing cognitive diversity. However, there is one benefit that has recently come to the forefront that must be mentioned. A well-documented decline in student comprehension and retention of subject matter has followed in the wake of the recent pandemic. While this decline in achievement on standardized testing instruments is easy to statistically document and quantify, there is another element of student growth and learning that has come to the attention of instructional specialists. Coming out of the pandemic, more students have anxiety and the missed instructional time has led to foundational skill gaps more prevalent and widespread than in previous years. The techniques of differentiated instruction are now in even higher demand among students who would have normally been in standard academic tracks of instruction.

In response to this setback in foundational skills, a growing number of schools are trying to provide their teachers with trained co-teaching partners who specialize in the methods of special education. Perhaps the anxiety and traumatic experience of the sudden disconnect in the education process brought about by the pandemic will subside and give way to a more “normal” experience of school in the coming months and years. For now though, instructors and leaders are working furiously and trying to learn from one another the best ways to get all of our students and schools back on track. There is no doubting that the role and techniques of educators trained in all methods of differentiated instruction will have to play a critical part in that systemic recovery. Schools that have already made the commitment to having these professionals as a part of their faculty and staff have given their students and families a leg up on being able to recover much of the foundation for learning that was lost.

Taking the Next Steps

The principles to which a school community should adhere, regardless of the level of differentiated instruction and special needs it is capable of providing, are typical of start-up efforts. Though not etched in stone, some of the basic steps include:

Assemble the Team

- Assemble your team – no one does this alone! Key members in the overwhelming majority of cases include the principal, a few select department heads, assistant principal or curriculum specialist, a board member or two with particular interest or expertise in the area. Additionally, many diocesan and congregational education offices have personnel who specialize in services to students with disabilities. Do not overlook involving parents of students with disabilities as key members of your team. Parents of these children, who have been navigating these waters for many years, are often keenly aware of many available resources within a community.

About the author ...



Joseph D. Hollowell, Ed.D.
Adjunct Consultant

For 30 years Joe Hollowell served as the chief administrator of Roncalli High School, including 25 years as the school’s first president. During that time Roncalli earned the Blue Ribbon School of Excellence award three times. Joe also served as chemistry teacher, coach, science department chair, dean of students, and principal for five years prior to becoming president. In addition, Joe has a passion for outdoor education; he still teaches a wilderness education and leadership class every summer. Joe earned both a B.S. in Chemistry and an M.S. in School Administration at Butler University, and he holds a Doctorate of Education in Interdisciplinary Leadership from Creighton University.

[Check out Joe’s webinar on this topic.](#)

CSM SERVICES	Strategy		Planning		Leadership	
	School Assessments	Advancement	Enrollment	Communication	Governance	Workshops and Webinars
	Program Audits	Alumni	Technology	Social Media Plans	Administrative Structure	Retreat Facilitation
	Enrollment	Capital Campaigns	Annual Fund	Strategic Planning	Search	Keynote Presentations
	Marketing	Feasibility Studies	Development	Financial	Board Training/ Development	Individual Seminars and Series
	Mission Clarification	Marketing		Professional Mentoring		

Mary J. Foley
Managing Director
 Richard J. Burke
Founder
 Jacqueline Abrahams
 Robert A. Bailey
 Edward J. Barrett
 Norah Boucher
 Joseph W. Bracco
 Susan A. Castagna
 Phyllis Cavallone
 Frank J. Cawley
 Sr. Carol Cimino, SSJ, Ed.D.
 Austin L. Conley, III, Ed.D.
 Michael M. Denison
 Greg Dhuyvetter
 Lois K. Draina, Ph.D.
 Donald L. Edwards, Ed.D.
 Rachel L. Ellingson
 Henry Fiore, Jr.
 Susana A. Garcia
 Terry Granger
 Stephen J. Hammond
 Susan R. Hoffman
 Joseph D. Hollowell
 David J. Holquin
 Jennifer C. Kensel
 Kelly M. Lazzara
 Sr. M. Paul McCaughey, O.P.
 Deborah L. Papa
 G. Joseph Peters
 Thomas H. Posnanski
 Mary Beth Riley
 Mary Lou Schoone
 Barbara F. Simmons
 Robin Slinkard
 Tina Walker
 Alan V. Weyland
 Nicholas M. Wolsonovich, Ph.D.
 Frederick Zilian, Ph.D.

Link the Program to the Mission of the School

- Base the program within the context of the Catholic mission of the school. Literature from the Church is abundantly clear on the call to educate ALL Catholic students. The aforementioned *National Standards and Benchmarks* is a good place to start, but there are opportunities to expand on this support from many Catholic sources to justify this new direction for any Catholic school.
- Develop a clear understanding and succinct answers to the questions, “Why do we need to invest in this?” and “How does this program fit within the mission of the school?” Until the answers can be clearly articulated by school leaders, moving forward may do more harm than good.

Link the Program to Planning and Policy Efforts of the School

- Develop support and understanding of your plans and vision among faculty, board members, and local governing entities like diocesan officials and local religious leaders. The participation of these groups in development, review, and affirmation of the implementation plan provides valuable community-wide ownership and invested interest in seeing the program succeed.
- Use the normal planning and budgeting processes of the school to accommodate and reinforce communication of the vision of increasing cognitive diversity among the student body.

For Schools Looking to Take an Existing Program to the Next Level

- Confirm that special needs teachers have adequate funds budgeted to participate in quality professional development opportunities.
- Network with other learning specialists at Catholic schools and public schools to gain inspiration and to help overcome emerging obstacles you face.
- Develop a broad array of volunteers for testing, tutoring, mentoring, and reading within the community. These volunteers can normally relieve some of the load that special needs resource teachers have when they are appropriately trained by professional faculty and staff.
- Fund and hire appropriate staff based upon planned new directions.
- Learn and understand how to take full advantage of public funding available and administered by the LEA (Local Educational Agency). These funds can often be in the six and seven-figure range, and many times leaders of the LEAs do not fully understand the legal responsibilities they have to see that these funds are equitably distributed to private schools for whom they serve as stewards of the funds provided by federal and state governments.

Pilgrims on a Journey

Much like our imaginary school trip at the beginning of this article, we are all pilgrims on this journey. In Catholic schools, students are blessed to be on that pilgrimage within the context of a faith experience shared among both their teachers and peers. By embracing cognitive diversity as a goal to be pursued, the full blossoming of our students will be aided by the variety of cultures, ideas, and perspectives offered by their classmates. The author of Genesis tells us God created the world and saw that it was good. Cognitive diversity is one of the blessings that God gave the world. We would all do well to take full advantage of what the Lord is trying to teach us through this beautiful gift.



A division of Christian Brothers Services

For more information about Catholic School Management, call 203.421.5169 or visit us at cbservices.org/csm.html.

Sign up to receive the *CSML* at cbservices.org/csml-sign-up.html or send an email to csml@cbservices.org.

© Copyright 2023 Catholic School Management, a division of Christian Brothers Services. CSM and *Catholic School Management Letter* are registered trademarks of Catholic School Management.

