The Power of Collaborative Networks to Support Catholic School Inclusion

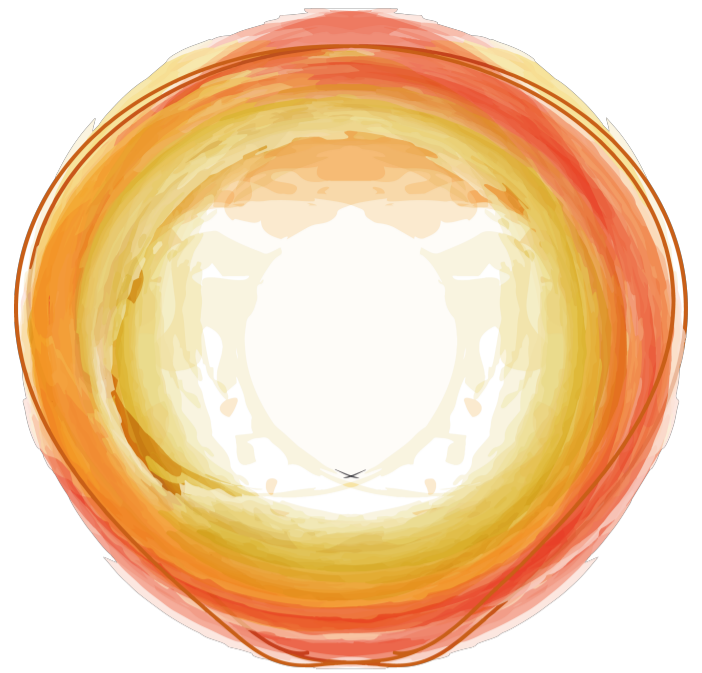Sandria Morten, Ed.D. and Jorge Peña, Ed.D.

Mustard Seed Project 2018

Andrew M. Greeley Center for Catholic Education
Loyola University Chicago

The Pastoral Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities (November 16, 1978) has been referred to as one of the most important documents of the American Church regarding persons with disabilities. It sets forth a vision of Church where all are truly welcomed. The Pastoral Statement has as much relevance for Catholic organizations today as it did 40 years ago, at its publication. Increasingly, Catholic schools are responding to this call to open their doors to students with disabilities, yet they are in need of supports and guidance in order to effectively build more inclusive environments.

The Mustard Seed Project 2018 celebrates the 40th anniversary of this landmark document set forth by the U.S. Catholic bishops. The Mustard Seed Project 2018 explores this urgent call for inclusion, explores the necessary supports needed to enhance the response to this call and provide an important opportunity for Catholic school professionals to network and share best practices.

The Mustard Seed Project: Inclusive Practices in Catholic Schools is an annual conference sponsored by the Andrew M. Greeley Center for Catholic Education at the School of Education: Loyola University Chicago. For more information, visit www.luc.edu/gcce

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Introduction

Forty years ago, the United States Council of Catholic Bishops issued a statement imploring the leaders of the Church to ensure the full participation of persons with disabilities in the life of the parish.   The bishops reminded us of Jesus' ministry of embracing those forced to the fringes of society - the blind, the lepers, the deaf, the crippled - and that "the Church finds its true identity when it fully integrates itself with these 'marginalized' people, including those that suffer from physical and psychological disabilities" (NCCB, 1978, p.4).

This directive includes our Catholic schools. To some, it is surprising and disheartening to realize how little progress has been made with meaningfully including students with disabilities in Catholic schools in the past forty years. However, there are many Catholic schools around the country who have heard and responded to this call for inclusion. In these Catholic school classrooms, universally designed curriculum, differentiation, and flexibility in instructional methods is the norm. Many of these schools have adopted Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) as a framework to provide supports to students in need of academic and behavioral interventions.

Additionally, advocacy groups such as the National Catholic Board on Full Inclusion, and fundraising and educational organizations such as FIRE Foundation and the Catholic Coalition for Special Education have been developed to promote and provide support for inclusive Catholic schools. There are grass-root efforts, such as the Catholic Inclusion Network of Central Ohio, initiated by Catholic school principals to provide professional development and share resources to support all learners. Some dioceses have also responded to the call including the Diocese of Grand Rapids which has named inclusive practices in Catholic schools a strategic priority and developed the Student Support Services Network which brings together teachers from the diocesan schools monthly to collaborate around best practices to serve diverse learners.

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Increasingly, Catholic schools are responding to this call to open their doors to students with disabilities, yet they are in need of supports and guidance in order to effectively build inclusive environments where all truly belong. The Andrew M. Greeley Center for Catholic Education, at Loyola University Chicago, developed the Mustard Seed Project as an opportunity to provide support and networking for Catholic schools committed to inclusion. The conference, in its fourth year, has grown each year and this year was extended from a one day conference to a 2.5 day conference, attracting Catholic school administrators, teacher leaders and diocesan leaders from across the country. The October 2018 conference was specifically geared toward leadership teams and the participants represented 61 different schools and organizations in 16 states, demonstrating the increase in interest and commitment to inclusion across the country.

At its core, becoming an inclusive Catholic school is a school improvement initiative aimed at improving academic, social-emotional, and spiritual outcomes for all community members. Like any school improvement effort, inclusion requires a clear, articulated vision and a systematic approach. The leadership teams that attended the Mustard Seed Conference, and all Catholic schools embracing inclusive practices, have a common goal, yet are at varying places in their journey toward inclusive education. Some schools are just beginning to consider accepting students of different abilities and other schools have established policies, practices, and levels of support. Therefore, applying the theory of improvement science (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015) can help each leadership team understand the particular system at play in their school and make logical decisions to address current problems and improve inclusive practices.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how improvement science can be used to address barriers in developing and sustaining inclusive environments in Catholic schools. The paper will explain key components of the improvement science process and share how the leadership teams participating in the Mustard Seed Project 2018 applied those processes to better understand the realities of their inclusion efforts and develop meaningful theories of action to bring their schools to the next level. Those who have heeded the call of the Church to embark on this journey of inclusion may sometimes feel alone or overwhelmed by the challenges, however through intentional networking and collaboration and applying common principles of improvement science, these schools can gain a true understanding of where they are now and where they need to go next.

Why Improvement Science Works for Catholic School Inclusion

When it comes to inclusion in Catholic schools, most leaders can relate to the phrase "we're building the plane while we are flying it." Often, a school's inclusion journey begins with one student, a student whose needs may have historically prevented her from attending a Catholic school until one principal said "yes." This "yes" is often accompanied by a great deal of anxiety because the teachers do not yet have the necessary knowledge and skills to serve this student's needs and because the school does not yet have the systems in place to deliver the supports. While it may seem ideal to be able to freeze time to create all of the necessary systems and structures and deliver all of the needed professional development before admitting students with disabilities into our schools, the reality is that we need to build, adjust and improve our system as we go. You could spend
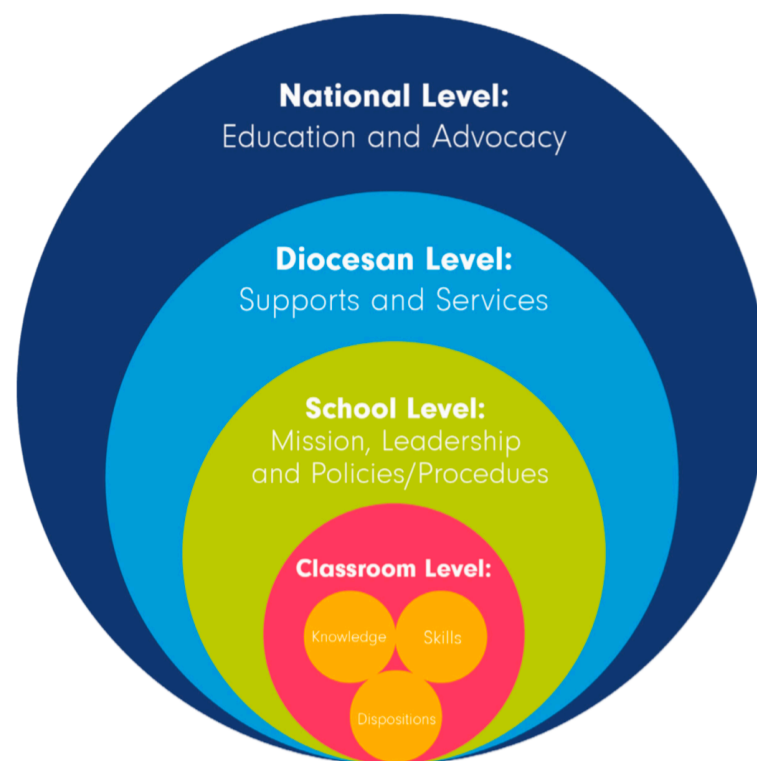
Figure A: Integrated Support System for Students with Disabilities in Catholic Schools (Boyle, 2016)

years researching and planning to build the perfect plane, but if you never take off, you will never know if it will fly.

Improvement science allows us to implement a necessary change and leverage what we are learning about what is working, and what is not working, so that we can continually improve. Bryk et al. (2015) call this learning by doing. It recognizes that a change such as becoming an inclusive Catholic school is complex. It includes the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of teachers and leaders at the classroom, school, and diocesan level, as well as school and diocesan level policies, procedures, and protocol (Boyle, 2018). Therefore, improvement science can provide a process to "guide the development, revision, and continued fine-tuning of new tools, processes, working roles, and relationships" (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, n.d., para. 1) essential to an inclusive Catholic school.

Improvement science also values collaboration with others who are trying to solve a similar problem. Catholic schools and Catholic school teachers have become accustomed to standing alone, whether due to small staff sizes,

geography, competition, or a lack of opportunity to network with others. Yet the core belief that "we can accomplish more together than even the best of us can accomplish alone" (Bryk et al., 2015, p. 17) rings true for Catholic schools embracing inclusion. The Mustard Seed Project provides opportunities for leadership teams to learn from one another and compare the results of initiatives and interventions aimed at improving inclusive practices.

A Systems Framework for Inclusion

Creating an inclusive environment in a Catholic school is not as simple as hiring special education staff or creating a "program." All too often, schools employ these ad hoc responses when accepting students with disabilities which fail to recognize the multiple layers of support necessary. Boyle (2016) offers the Integrated Framework for Serving Students with Disabilities in Catholic Schools (Figure A) to represent the multi-layered and comprehensive system needed to address all students' needs. In his 2018 publication, Ensuring a Place at the Table: Serving Students with Disabilities in Catholic Schools, he presents a series

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of self-assessments to help school implement the framework in practice. These self-assessments are useful for validating those practices already in place as well as identifying areas in need of growth.

Bryk et al. (2015) remind us that we cannot improve what we cannot measure. The self-assessments allow Catholic school leaders to determine what practices, knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to inclusion have been developed, partially developed, or are still undeveloped. The self-assessments provide Catholic schools with an end goal, an understanding of what needs to be in place in order to achieve their vision of becoming an inclusive Catholic school.

Even with a leader's best efforts to make progress in developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of the school's teachers and create policies, procedures and protocols to support inclusion, the school's culture may not be one of belonging. During the keynote address of the Mustard Seed Project, Boyle (2018) challenged participants to examine whether students with disabilities truly belong, as an essential component of the community, rather than as an "add on." He discussed inclusion as a continuum (Figure B) beginning with inviting, where students with disabilities would be invited to the experience the existing educational program and identity with basic accommodations. The next phase would be welcoming, where individual systems are created to meet individual needs with little impact on the larger system. During this phase, students are referred to as "yours" or "mine" but never "ours." The final, and optimal phase for inclusion, is belonging. Here, systems are responsive to the various needs of the school community and are seen as integral. The community works to ensure that the student with disability has their presence, gifts, and perspective visible and valued.
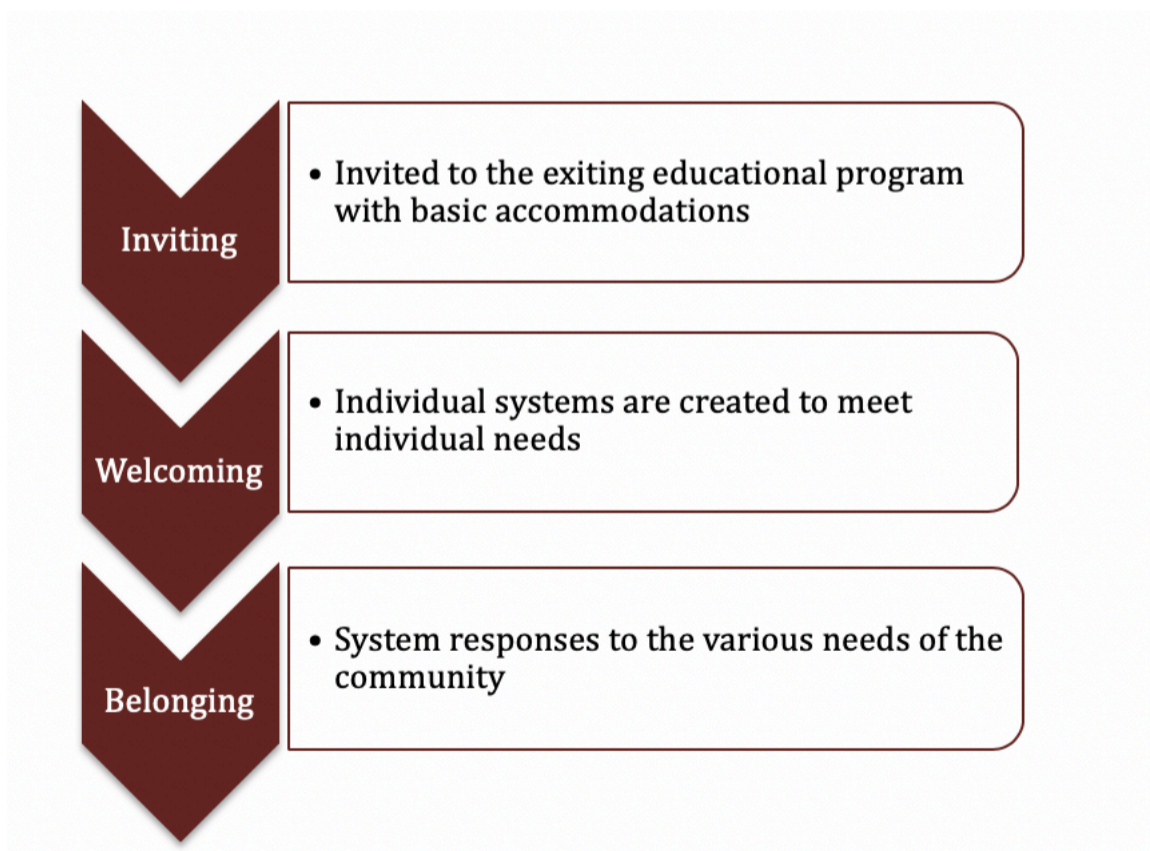

Inviting
- Invited to the exiting educational program with basic accommodations

Welcoming
- Individual systems are created to meet individual needs

Belonging
- System responses to the various needs of the community

Figure B: Inclusion Continuum (Boyle, 2018)

Boyle further challenged the Mustard Seed attendees to be aware of four common barriers to belonging that can be present in school communities: sympathy, tokenism, competition, and elitism. A sympathetic person "feels sorry" for the person with the disability. If this response is prevalent in a school community students with disabilities are viewed as different, and in most cases, someone who is less. If tokenism is a cultural norm, the student with a disability is reduced to the status of mascot. All of the things that the student does is glorified just because the person has a disability and ultimately the student is objectified. The barrier of competition exists when there is a prevailing perception that including students with disabilities will place the school at some kind of competitive disadvantage. This often suggests that the school has fallen into a private school mentality and not fully embraced their identity and mission as a Catholic school. The final barrier is elitism, where there is a tolerance for those with disabilities as long as it doesn't interfere with the experience for "my child" or "the rest of the class." This has to do with status, with parents expecting the Catholic school to provide a leg up for their child and wanting nothing to stand in the way of their child's success.

Identify the Problem and See the System

Consistent with the cultural challenges of establishing belonging in some Catholic schools, every Catholic school experiences problems through its evolution of becoming an inclusive school. Bryk et. al (2015) reminds us that "one cannot predict ahead of time all of the details that need to be worked through nor the unintended negative consequences that might also ensue" (p. 7). The key to success is being able to specifically identify those problems and to respond meaningfully.

The first step is to identify a specific problem that you are experiencing within your inclusive program. While there may be a multitude of challenges within your school related to inclusion, choose one that is student-centered and has evidence to validate its existence. For example, it may feel problematic that three teachers on faculty are vocally opposed to inclusion. However, the fact that there are a few unhappy teachers is not in and of itself is not the problem. The problem instead may be that 70% of the students with diagnosed disabilities in grades 4-8 are not making expected academic progress in core subjects as evidenced by the standardized test scores. One potential reason that the students may not be progressing is because the teachers are not providing necessary supports due to their negative mindset about inclusion.

However, it is important to be cautious about jumping to conclusions related to the cause of the stagnant standardized assessment scores. Bryk et al. (2015) urges school leaders to avoid *solutionitis* as an education reform disease. When a problem presents itself, it is natural for people to formulate a solution according to their past experiences, professional knowledge, and beliefs about what seems appropriate. There is a propensity for people to jump quickly on a solution before fully understanding the exact problem to be solved. According to Bryk et al. (2015) *solutionitis*, "is a form of groupthink in which a set of shared beliefs results in an incomplete analysis of the problem to be addressed and fuller consideration of potential problem-solving alternatives" (p. 24). This approach to school improvement lures leaders into unproductive strategies.

Instead, school leaders must think deeply about the problem and analyze the many elements of the complex system that contributes to the problem. A quote attributed to Albert Einstein applies: "If I had an hour to solve a problem, I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions." Bryk et al. (2015) suggest engaging in root cause analysis to ask yourself over and over again, "Why do we get these negative results?" Teams of administrators and teachers should brainstorm together, flushing out all the probable causes of the problem.

The problem above related to the lack of growth in cores subjects was explored by a team at the Mustard Seed Conference. During the root cause analysis, this team asked, "Why aren't the 70% of the students with disabilities showing progress?" and one teacher may say, "because the teachers aren't differentiating."

Then the team will probe further to ask, "Why aren't the teachers differentiating?" and a response may be that some teachers haven't received training in differentiation or that the reading program follows a pacing guide with little room for deviation. The rounds of "why" would continue often times identifying causes in broad categories that may include teacher knowledge/skills/dispositions, curriculum, instructional practices, resources, family characteristics, classroom environment, schedule, and policies. Boyle's self-assessments (2017) are a valuable starting point for identifying the causes that may be related to a problem within your inclusion program. This team identified underdeveloped criteria from the classroom level knowledge, skills and dispositions, as well as recognizing the barrier of competition within their school's institutional history as contributing factors to the lack of growth for their students.
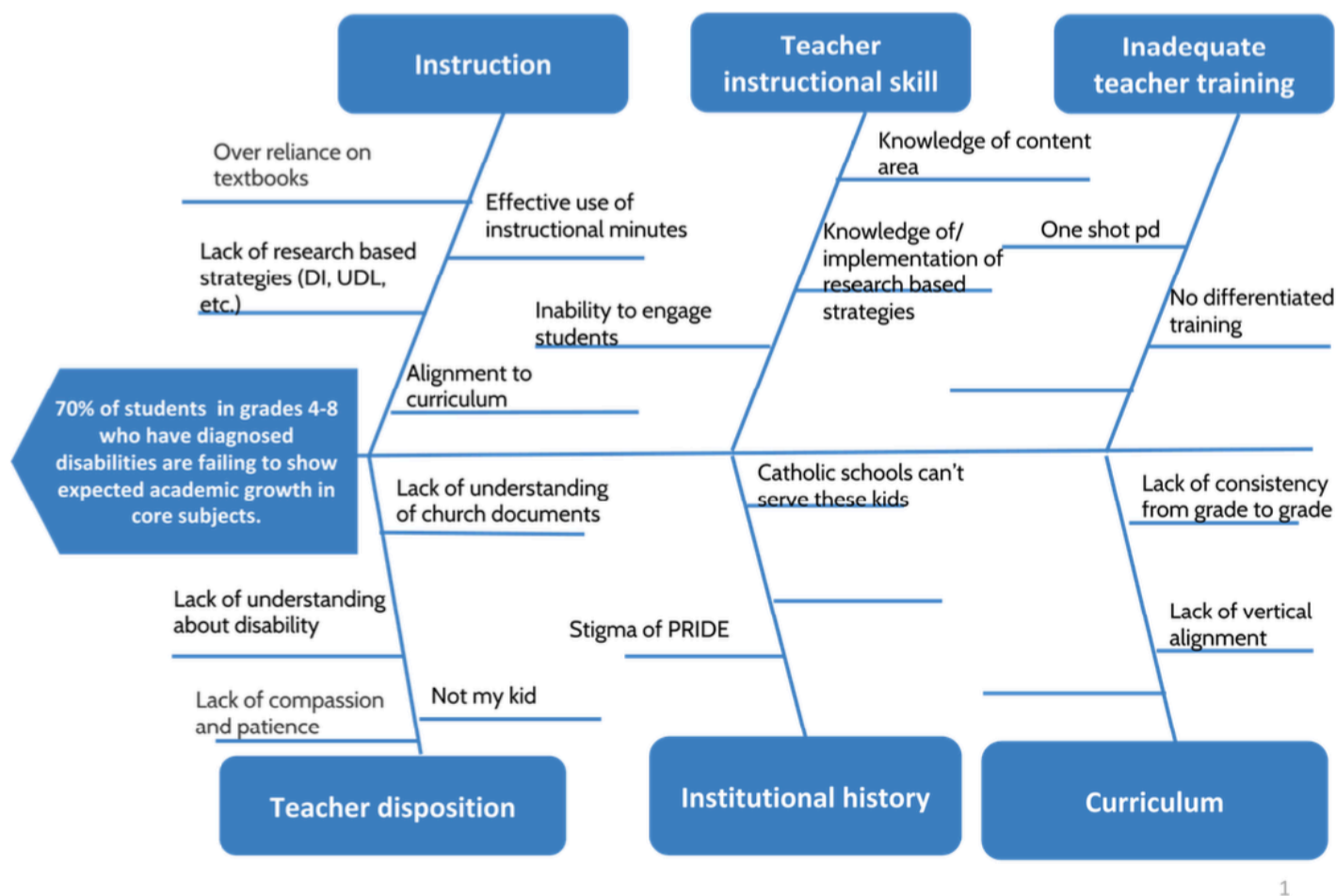

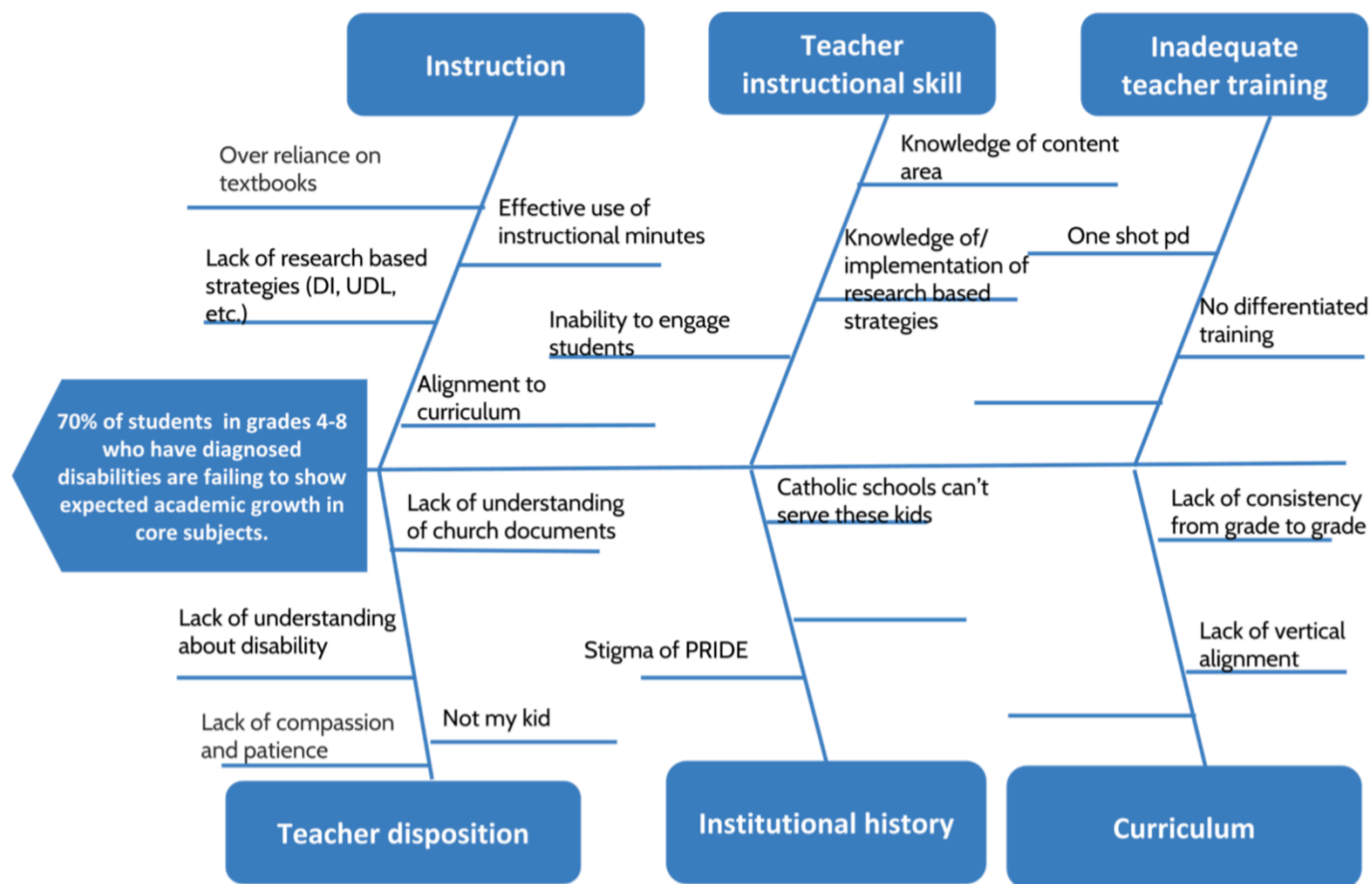*Figure C: Root Cause Analysis using a Fishbone Diagram - Team A*

Figure D: Root Cause Analysis using a Fishbone Diagram - Team B

Figure D shows the causal analysis from another team attending the Mustard Seed Project. This team identified a problem with the students in Tier 2 and 3 in the seventh and eighth grades. Similarly, there was no evidence of these students making progress since they were not being routinely monitored. Using the fishbone tool to perform causal analysis uncovered several root causes to this problem including some similar causes to the first example such as curriculum and instruction, and other root causes such as scheduling and staffing that are particular to this school and situation.

Root cause analysis ensures that school teams come to a common understanding of the problem and the contributing causes. This process prepares the teams to develop a theory of action to address this problem which, if carried out with fidelity and monitored closely, is much more likely to lead to overall improvement.

Develop a Theory of Action

Once the problem is understood in depth through root cause analysis, the teams need to make decisions as to what strategies to carry out to address the problem. A Theory of Action is guided by disciplined inquiry. School leaders ask and collaborate with staff to answer the following questions:

1. *What specifically are we trying to accomplish?*

2. *What change might we introduce and why?*

3. *How will we know that a change is actually an improvement?*

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A Theory of Action requires having a relentless focus on evidence. This begins with identifying exactly what the aim or goal is. Rather than stating, "we need to better serve students with disabilities in our school" which is overly broad, or "we need more professional development" which is a strategy rather than an outcome, the leaders must be able to convert their problem statement into a measurable, student-centered aim. Returning to the example of Team A from the Mustard Seed Project, an aim was developed for 80% of the students with diagnosed disabilities to meet or exceed their annual growth goals.

Secondly the team must determine which specific changes to introduce so as to meet this aim. We want to avoid the shotgun approach of trying strategy after strategy and hoping one "sticks" and rather use research and experience to determine which changes would specifically address the causes of the problem identified through the root cause analysis. Team A identified not only professional development, but also individualized coaching and observing teachers in inclusive Catholic schools as necessary changes to impact the problematic instructional practices, curriculum and teacher dispositions. Further, they determined that accountability for teachers implementing the recommended accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities would be a necessary strategy to lead to improved achievement for these students.

Lastly, the leaders need to continually collect evidence to determine if the changes are leading to improvement. School leaders must cultivate the habit of having a relentless focus on evidence by asking, how do we know we know? Without this, they run the risk of investing in resources and not realizing they are not working in time to make necessary adjustments. Relying on evidence establishes objectivity and creates trust. A relentless focus on a wide-range of evidence helps prevent drawing inferences into all kinds of things that may be supported with limited evidence. For example, perhaps the professional development, coaching, observation, and accountability for accommodations and modifications occurs, however the student outcomes do not improve. One could make the dangerous assumption that the needs of those specific students with disabilities cannot be met in the school. However, if they had focused on collecting evidence related to the effectiveness of specific changes, they may have learned that the teachers found the professional development to be misaligned with their needs and not to include any practical strategies. Having that piece of evidence would allow the leaders to adjust the professional development so that it is meaningful and practical, thereby being more likely to lead to positive outcomes for students. Having a relentless focus on evidence as a habit takes a determined effort.

 So what is a Theory of Action? It is a statement of causal relationship between a strategy and its intended result in improving teaching and learning. The Theory of Action is

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empirically falsifiable and as Bryk et al. (2015) state "is possibly wrong and definitely incomplete" (p. 163). It is meant to be revised as evidence is gathered for analysis.

A Theory of Action has three requirements. First, it must begin with a statement of causal relationship between what educators do and what constitutes a good result in the school. The Theory of Action is stated as an if-then proposition. Second, it must be empirically falsifiable, that is, it must be able to disqualify all or parts of the theory as a useful guide to action that is based on evidence of what occurs as a consequence of the actions. No strategy is executed perfectly; therefore, evidence is collected regularly to make adjustments to the strategy. Third, it must be open ended; that is, it must prompt educators to further revise and specify the causal relationships initially identified as educators learn more about the consequences of the actions.

Practically speaking, how is a Theory of Action developed? The leadership team engages in intentional collaboration by leveraging the findings and learning from the root cause analysis to create the Theory of Action. Intentional collaboration occurs by structuring the conversation, so the collective wisdom of the group is brought to bear through synergy. Collaboration is important in this work because individuals are limited to their own beliefs, worldviews, and biases. Individuals have a singular perspective. The collective perspective of the group is used to create the Theory of Action. The work of school improvement is complex. Understanding the work style preferences, personality types, or leadership strengths of the members of the leadership team helps the team organize for collaborative work when creating the Theory of Action.

The Theory of Action is created by responding to prompts in three columns. In Figure E, you will find the Theory of Action that Team A developed during the Mustard Seed Project.

This Theory of Action provided the team with a well-informed plan for improvement in their inclusive practices. It was recommended that they return to their school campus and share this theory with other stakeholders to ensure it represents the collective understanding of the problem and a logically aligned set of changes to impact the problem. This theory could then be translated into an action plan so that changes can be implemented, evidence collected to determine effectiveness, and the theory can be continually revised and improved based on that evidence.

Conclusion

The participants of the Mustard Seed Project reported feeling empowered to make change upon returning to their schools and dioceses. In particular, they noted feeling validated by the idea that any school's efforts to provide an inclusive environment is a work in progress but they they could learn from one another and through systematic trial and error. It is important to celebrate the successes along the journey.

In particular, the participants shared that they felt empowered through the use of the protocol for root cause analysis and developing a theory of action. These were processes they intended to bring back to their school communities to utilize for a variety of

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Mustard Seed Project Theory of Action		
Proposed Strategy: *If we do this,* (Describe in detail)	*Then "x" will happen* (Explain why this will work, be specific)	*And we will see result in…..*
If teachers… • Participate in on-going, high quality PD on best practices for curriculum accessibility • Participate in individualized coaching to support implementation of inclusive and accessibility practices • Observe teachers from other schools who are inclusive in their practices • Implement the recommended accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities	Then…teacher dispositions and knowledge capacity will increase giving them the tools to implement practices that provide student-centered instruction that meets the needs of all learners	Increased percentage of students (80%) in grades 4-8 with diagnosed disabilities meeting growth expectations

Figure E: Theory of Action for Team A

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purposes. They also felt confident that the Theory of Action they developed during the conference left them with actionable steps to enact at their schools.

The Mustard Seed Project brings together Catholic school leaders from across the country who are committed to ensuring there is a place at the table for all students who seek a Catholic education. Utilizing the improvement science framework can provide these leaders and other Catholic school leaders with a process for assessing the effectiveness of inclusive programming and propelling them to the next level. This collaborative process should not only be reserved for national conferences but can be happening at the diocesan and local levels.

For forty years we have been operating as silos, singular Catholic schools doing their best to build inclusive programming to serve their community. While there have been some individual schools that have experienced success, there has been little change in the Catholic school system related to who we serve and the supports we provide. It is through systematic collaboration, bringing schools together to critically analyze the results of their efforts, that we will "learn fast to implement well" (Bryk et al., 2015, p. 7). We simply cannot wait another 40 years before making major strides in the supports we can provide for students with disabilities in our schools.

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