

# WHOLE SCHOOLING RESEARCH PROJECT

## I. INTRODUCTION

We began this study by developing a framework of principles with associated practices that we believed represented best practices in schooling for all students. In this framework, which we have called Whole Schooling, inclusive education for students with disabilities was a central rather than peripheral component. The principles composing the framework were interactive and necessarily dependent upon one another. The precise description and language of these principles has undergone revision throughout this study and related activities as we have learned more about images of best practices. In many ways, a major product of this research project has been a refinement and clarification of the Five Principles of Whole Schooling as reflecting best practices for inclusive education. As of May 2002, the Five Principles of Whole Schooling are as follows:



1. **Empower citizens in a democracy:** The goal of education is to help students learn to function as effective citizens in a democracy.
2. **Include all.** All children learn together across culture, ethnicity, language, ability, gender, and age.
3. **Engage in authentic multi-level teaching.** Teachers design instruction for diverse learners that engages them in active learning in meaningful, real-world activities, and develop accommodations and adaptations for learners with diverse needs, interests, and abilities.
4. **Build community and support learning.** The school uses specialized school and community resources (e.g., special education, Title I, gifted education) to build support for students, parents, and teachers. All work together to build community and mutual support within the classroom and school and provide proactive supports for students with behavioral challenges.
5. **Partner with families and the community.** Educators engage in genuine collaboration within the school and with families and the community, engage the school in strengthening the community, and engage students, parents, teachers, and others in decision-making and direction of learning and school activities.

Our prime research goal has been understanding how these principles relate to effective implementation of inclusive education. We expected that when we found these practices

effectively implemented, we would find more intense and successful implementation of inclusive education. Conversely, we expected that when we found effective inclusive education, we would find the other exemplary practices being implemented as the foundation of the success. As we shall detail in the pages below, these proved simultaneously to be a correct and naïve hypothesis.

The first major step in this project, therefore, was the development of the framework for Whole Schooling that served as the basis of the hypotheses and research questions we explored our research. We now describe the process by which these principles were developed along with their present form.

The first draft of the principles of Whole Schooling was developed by Michael Peterson and Kim Beloin, respectively from Wayne State University in Detroit and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, as they outlined ideas for what came to be called the Whole Schooling Research Project. They came together in a 3 day meeting at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point in July of 1997 to explore a potential research project based on the belief that good teaching practices and inclusive education were mutually complementary and reinforcing, rather than at odds. This perspective was based on their mutual involvement with inclusive education systems change projects in Michigan and Wisconsin. As a result, the principles they drafted were a synthesis of literature review, research, and engagement with inclusive education change efforts in schools.

Michael Peterson and Kim Beloin met in a small university office for three full days, exploring how to articulate and structure a study. Gradually, they moved from thinking about the positive interrelationships between inclusive education and constructivist, authentic teaching approaches only and began to articulate a hypothesis that inclusive education was consistent with and dependent upon relationships with other components of exemplary schooling and teaching. Prior to the second day meeting, Michael made a list of such exemplary practices and gave it the working title of “whole schooling”.

Subsequently, Michael and Kim spent the next two days developing these ideas and fleshing out a process for the research study. At that point, six principles of whole schooling were listed: (1) Including all students learning together; (2) Teaching for diversity; (3) Adapting and differentiating; (4) Supporting Learning; (5) Building community and proactive responses to behavioral challenges; and (6) Partnering with parents and the community.

On his return to Detroit, Michael met with Richard Gibson, social studies faculty member and colleague who was also to be partner in the research project. As the two of them reviewed the initial framework, Rich had several questions and concerns. He and Michael had been conferring intensely at Wayne State University for more than a year, exploring issues of social justice, needs and problems of schools, particularly in the Detroit Public Schools, and interactions of many issues – inclusive education, effective teaching, content of instruction, race and class. Rich asked: “What is it all for? What is the purpose of schooling?” Out of this initial interaction and subsequent discussion, the team added a critical piece as the underlying foundation of the entire framework: *citizenship in a democracy*, as both an outcome for effective schooling and a process of school change, management, and classroom practice.

In our articulation of these principles, we have drawn on research related to exemplary teaching practices, inclusive education and national progressive school reform organizations, particularly Accelerated Schools, Comer’s School Development Program, Howard Gardner’s Project Zero, and Sizer’s Coalition for Essential Schools. However, the principles of Whole Schooling have sought to address several problematic issues in schooling that include not addressed comprehensively by these other projects and organizations:

- The ongoing segregation of students with different learning styles and abilities into special programs for students with disabilities, at risk, gifted, limited English speaking.
- Instructional strategies based on isolated, skills-centered instruction that is disconnected from the real lives and family and community experience of students.
- The need for democratic processes of decision-making in schools that empower students, families, teachers, and other school staff.
- Lack of supports for families and lack of connection between families, schools, and communities.
- The lack of attention to the social and political context of schooling – the increasing inequality in schools and communities, pressures for standardized testing that separate students, families, and whole communities by race, socio-economic status, and ability.

While the research project was not funded the first year, a range of actions resulted that served as a field-test of the face validity of the Whole Schooling framework and provided numerous additional opportunities for analysis and dialogue that sharpened the articulation of the principles of Whole Schooling and the research questions of this study. The team developed a concept paper and description of the framework that formed the basis for this study that was used to communicate with other parties<sup>1</sup>.



Both Michael Peterson and Kim Beloin shared information about the Whole Schooling framework with two principals in Michigan and Wisconsin, respectively. They were surprised that one principal from a very rural Wisconsin school stated that these principles articulated well the type of school he and his staff had been trying to be for many years. The Detroit principal was anxious to improve her school in concert with district initiatives, and became excited that this framework articulated the type of school they would like to work to *become*. Within a week of speaking with us, she presented the framework to her staff who unanimously adopted it.

Within a short time, these two principals sought to recruit other schools to work together in using the Whole Schooling principles as a guide to their school improvement efforts. By February of 1998, the Whole Schooling Consortium was established as a working network of schools and faculty members.

During the time in which we have engaged in this research project, the Whole Schooling Consortium has grown and developed, providing a great many opportunities for dialogue, learning, and thinking regarding the principles and practices that were outlined as the framework. These activities have included: (1) two national conferences held in Detroit in the summers of 1999 and 2000, and based on the Whole Schooling principles; (2) major presentations for three years at the annual meeting of The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps (TASH), including sponsorship of a one day strand on inclusive education and school reform, at the annual meeting of National Council for the Social Studies, and at state and local conferences in

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.coe.wayne.edu/CommunityBuilding/WSPaper.html>

Michigan and Wisconsin; (3) development of a growing network of interested university faculty, teachers, and principals, and parents in 15 states.

During the last year of the project, several project schools in Michigan led the formation of the Michigan Network for Inclusive Schooling, drawing together some 12 schools in a learning network based on the Five Principles of Whole Schooling. In the last year, we have organized three one-day conferences through this group.

From a qualitative research perspective, these many activities have provided extensive opportunity for discussion regarding our observations in schools and our understanding of the interaction of practices associated with the Five Principles of Whole Schooling to create effective, inclusive schools. Out of these processes, we found that the principles of Whole Schooling indeed embody a useful framework to address important issues that have been inadequately addressed in most school reform efforts.



These activities and discussions provided the context and backdrop for our actual research study in which we spent intensive time in seven schools selected because of their exemplary implementation of inclusive education, along with other key principles of the Whole Schooling framework. In addition, we had the simultaneous opportunity to collect information through action research and school reform projects in schools with problematic practices and to collect information by sampling of schools throughout the Detroit metropolitan area. As we describe below, all this has provided a very rich database from which to understand the relationship of inclusive education to whole school reform.