The Case for Disability Studies in K-12 Education

Project Purpose

Education and awareness are powerful tools. Every person, with or without a disability, has the right and the responsibility to be a contributing member of society. The Vermont SILC undertook the project of creating this curriculum in order to provide educators and students with materials that would promote the inclusion of students with disabilities in all aspects of school and community life.

Classroom teachers may be familiar with a variety of disability awareness curricula and programs designed for use with students of all ages. Although existing disability awareness programs teach children and adults about the cognitive, physical, and sensory differences associated with having a disability, they rarely include lessons addressing the Disability Community as a political, social, and cultural group. Compared to multicultural education programs focusing on other traditionally recognized minority groups, the content of many disability awareness programs is as limited as if multicultural curricula were restricted to the topic of why people have different skin colors. This often limited focus of disability awareness programs fails to address the full picture of Disability as a civil rights movement and cultural identity.

To understand the Disability Community as a distinct group, students will explore the history of discrimination experienced by this group and the critical people, places and events central to understanding the Disability Civil Rights Movement. Bringing the learning experience to a personal level, students will be encouraged to develop the skills necessary to recognize and prevent future discrimination. Through problem solving exercises, students will have the opportunity to practice some ways they might deal with potentially discriminatory situations and make positive changes in their communities.

In addition, disabled and non-disabled students will explore their personal connection to the Disability Community. Activities encourage students to enter into dialogue with their family and friends about people they know with disabilities. By putting this subject into personal perspective, students will have real life connections with the information presented in the curriculum. Students will also gain an awareness of the influence of language and media in shaping perceptions of people with disabilities. Finally, students will explore the civil rights laws, accommodations, and adaptive equipment or technology utilized by individuals with disabilities in their home, school, work and community lives.

As partners in this important endeavor, the Vermont SILC welcomes the efforts of educators who choose to invest in the promise of a more enlightened and accepting classroom. The PRIDE curriculum aims to create the opportunity for all students with and without disabilities to understand and achieve inclusion.
within their home, school, and community settings. With this unique approach for an integrated teaching tool, the Vermont SILC looks forward to future generations of people who more fully understand equality, dignity, and respect.

Project Background

The vision for this curriculum was defined in 2001 when the Vermont Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) decided it was time to address awareness issues relating to disability civil rights and independent living by providing educators with the necessary tool; a disability studies curriculum. In order to accomplish this goal, a four phase project was undertaken.

Phase 1 & 2: Assessment and Evaluation of Existing Curricula Materials

As preparation for curriculum development, the Vermont SILC sought input from educators and students throughout the state. During 2002, educators had the opportunity to respond to a written survey and phone interviews. Over 450 surveys were distributed to school principals, curriculum coordinators and special education administrators with a resulting 29% response rate. The survey tool asked educators to respond to questions about the presence and nature of disability-related curricula. Of the 138 respondents, 76 indicated their school implemented some type of disability curriculum materials or awareness events. Follow-up phone interviews were conducted with individuals indicating they would be willing to share more specific information about the materials used in their school.

During 2002, a focus group of ten high school students with and without disabilities was convened to provide recommendations on infusing disability studies within the general curriculum. This focus group was held in conjunction with the Vermont Youth Leadership Forum, a week-long student leadership and disability rights training program. Students provided feedback on content and implementation issues.

With the educator and student input in hand, an evaluation of existing curricula materials was conducted and a final report was issued at the end of 2002. The Phase 1 and 2 findings concluded that existing disability-related curricula materials primarily addressed disability issues from an “awareness of differences” point of view. However, existing materials did not effectively address issues such as discrimination, legal rights, and the cultural aspects of disability identity. In comparison, existing diversity or multi-cultural curricula materials seldom included a focus on the Disability Community as a minority group. Following Phase 1 and 2, the SILC moved into planning for implementation of Phase 3 through the recruitment of a Curriculum Development Coordinator.
Phase 3: Modernization of Curricula Material

In order to include all stakeholders in the process of developing this curriculum, a variety of community input activities were conducted during 2004 and 2005. In each activity, participants were recruited from the following stakeholder groups:

- Community Partners – parents of students with and without disabilities, community service providers, advocates within the Disability Civil Rights Movement, and other interested community members;

- Educators – classroom teachers, administrators, and other professionals representing general and special education; and

- Youth and Young Adults – emerging leaders in the Disability Civil Rights Movement

During the summer of 2004, an electronic survey was distributed to stakeholders within Vermont via the SILC and other education and disability advocacy organizations. In addition, the electronic survey was distributed nationally via the National Council on Independent Living’s (NCIL) member list serve. Respondents from sixteen states shared their recommendations regarding content, format and implementation issues.

During the fall of 2004, a series of input sessions were conducted with stakeholders in Vermont. These input sessions were conducted as a series of telephone and video conferences. As a result of these input sessions, a curriculum content outline was developed and ultimately approved by the Vermont SILC’s Education Initiatives Workgroup at the end of 2004.

During the summer and fall of 2005, two curriculum review teams were convened via telephone conferences. Participants included stakeholders from Vermont and across the country. Members of the first review team selected one or more grade level sections, depending on their area of expertise and interest, and provided input on the curriculum’s first draft. Members of the second review team provided input on the final draft, reviewing the curriculum document as a whole.

Phase 4: Implementation

With the completion of this curriculum, the Vermont SILC embarked on the initial stages of Phase 4 of this project. During the 2006-2007 school year, teachers in the state of Vermont participated in the first PRIDE curriculum pilot implementation project. Teachers representing the 2nd, 4th, 6th, 8th and 9th grades utilized the curriculum. The Vermont SILC continues with a focused in-state implementation effort.
In order to provide curriculum materials to a larger audience, the Vermont SILC also initiated a national outreach project during 2006. The Vermont SILC website was expanded to include a PRIDE curriculum section. Through the website, curriculum materials are available in pdf download format. Disk and hard copy formats are also available. The PRIDE curriculum materials will continue to be featured in workshop presentations at local and national conferences, and through local and national media coverage. Working collaboratively with educators, parents, individuals with disabilities, and other community partners, the Vermont SILC has great expectations about the positive impact this curriculum will have on students in Vermont and across the country.