Introduction

You may be approaching this text with the hope of finding the one simple answer or easy trick for teaching diverse learners. Like many teachers in today's educational world, you may have been disappointed because there is not a clear answer that works every time, for every student, from every background, in every school. Diversity comes in many forms. There is no one set of strategies, assessments, or accommodations that will enable every student always to be successful in the school environment. However, we believe there is a framework that may help you to ask the right questions, reflecting on your students, their backgrounds, and the instructional methods and assessments you use. It is our goal to present some crucial elements of that framework and to make them accessible and relevant to your classroom.

This book has two goals. The first is to allow you to examine your current repertoire of skills regarding instruction, assessment, and adaptations. Whether a new teacher or an accomplished and experienced veteran, each of us is constantly working to improve our practice in light of the changes that we see every year as communities, demographics, and populations change. These changes may present new challenges and require us to stretch our teaching repertoire in ways we might never have anticipated.

Equally important, the second goal of this book is to function as a guidebook to help you learn what important issues are most relevant to instruction of diverse learners and how best to acquire competency in those areas. To this end, the book addresses topics such as recent law and policy changes, cultural issues relevant to immigration, the process of acquiring a second language and the impact of that process on students' academic and social well-being, definitions of second-language acquisition, language difference and disability, and accommodations and modifications for students with special education needs or those in the process of second-language acquisition.

The upside of the challenges facing classroom teachers, of course, is that in reality we are not working "without assistance." Social and demographic changes, coupled with recent policy mandates, require all teachers to be aware of the needs of all students. However, those changes have also created a school climate where collaboration is encouraged. None of us works alone; in reality, many school professionals have complementary skill sets, and the most complete information possible can be gained when we work together. Imagine a situation where a third-grade student is having trouble in a reading lesson: The classroom teacher speaks to the reading teacher, speaks to the special educator,

and recommends that the special education referral process begin as soon as possible, so the student can be diagnosed and supported appropriately. Compare that process, with two or three professionals sharing information, with the following: The reading teacher sits down with the speech and language professional, the special educator, the classroom teacher, and the guidance counselor—all together in the same room at the same time—to identify the issues and craft a prereferral intervention that addresses all relevant factors impacting the student's performance. One could reasonably expect the second approach to be dramatically more successful. It is even more important for classroom teachers, faced with increasing pressure in this era of accountability and reform, to find support through their colleagues. This book is an effort to support you in identifying those within your building who might be the best, most effective sources of information and support, and to assist you in finding effective ways to move forward in collaborating with them for student success.

WHO SHOULD USE THIS BOOK

Increasingly, the responsibility of serving diverse learners falls not on "special" teachers or "special" programs. The twin national mandates of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which mandates placement in the "least restrictive environment" appropriate for students with disabilities, and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which evaluates schools based on all students' accomplishment of content objectives, required schools to incorporate diverse learners into general education classrooms and to focus on their achievement and progress once there. We strongly believe this change is a positive one; however, we also believe that inclusive programs demand adequate teacher support, awareness, and training. Inclusion without appropriate resources and collaborative practice is unfair to teachers and students alike. Therefore, we believe strongly that all teachers, including and especially general educators, must be aware of the skills and background knowledge needed to meet the students' needs. This book is designed for any classroom professional currently working with—or interested in learning how to work with—diverse learners: students with disabilities, English language learners (ELLs), students from minority populations, and so on.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We suggest that you use this book in a "both-and" kind of way: both as a practical guidebook and as an aid to reflective practice. One tenet of effective instruction is the value and importance of reflection and self-evaluation. According to Paolo Freire (1993), a Brazilian educator renowned for his contributions to the fields of both education and social justice, education "bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection . . . upon reality" because we meet our potential only through "inquiry" and "creative transformation" (p. 84). In other words, it is only through thinking about, and evaluating, what we do that we are able to consider what worked, what did not work, and what we can change, improve, or develop anew.

Figure 0.1	Eight Ways to Use This Book in Professional Growth

Even those of us who have years of experience are challenged to continue growing professionally and, often, to document that growth in professional portfolios, growth logs, and observations. Below are some suggestions for using the tools provided in this book for your own professional growth:

1. Begin a discussion group with colleagues on the chapter topics.

2. Summarize and present chapters at staff development meetings.

3. Read, reflect, and write on your own.

4. Complete the action steps listed at the end of each chapter, and include the results in your professional growth plan.

5. Summarize essential points from one or two chapters to provide a "guide" for colleagues.

6. Make an appointment with a colleague to plan together using suggestions from each chapter.

7. Meet with your school's instructional intervention team to generate a list of recommended general education interventions and adaptations.

8. Select a student or preservice teacher in your building and meet regularly with that individual to review particular chapters.

Figure 0.1 includes a number of suggestions for using this book for your own professional growth and for supporting change in your professional community. You can use this book on your own as a self-study activity as well: Reflective questions and activities are provided at the end of each chapter for that purpose.