High Expectations and Presumption of Competence

"We call upon people of good will to reexamine their attitudes toward their brothers and sisters with disabilities and promote their well-being, acting with the sense of justice and the compassion that the Lord so clearly desires. Further, realizing the unique gifts individuals with disabilities have to offer the Church, we wish to address the need for their integration into the Christian community and their fuller participation in its life.

Prejudice starts with the simple perception of difference, whether that difference is physical or psychological. Down through the ages, people have tended to interpret these differences in crude moral terms. Our group is not just different from theirs; it is better in some vague but compelling way. Few of us would admit to being prejudiced against people with disabilities. We bear them no ill will and do not knowingly seek to abrogate their rights. Yet people with disabilities are visibly, sometimes bluntly different from the norm, and we react to this difference. Even if we do not look down upon them, we tend all too often to think of them as somehow apart -- not completely one of us.

What individuals with disabilities need, first of all, is acceptance in this difference that can neither be denied nor overlooked. No acts of charity or justice can be of lasting value unless our actions are informed by a sincere and understanding love that penetrates the wall of strangeness and affirms the common humanity underlying all distinction. Scripture teaches us that "any other commandment there may be [is] all summed up in this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"(Rom.13:9) In His wisdom, Jesus said, "as yourself." We must love others from the inside out, so to speak, accepting their difference from us in the same way that we accept our difference from them." **(Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities)**

Our Language
KathieSnow – "Disability Is Natural" (http://www.disabilityisnatural.com/)

"Language reflects and reinforces our perceptions and misperceptions of others. All too frequently the terms used for people with disabilities perpetuate stereotypes and false ideas." (Paul Longmore and Dianne Piastro)

In a school that believes that all students have value and that disability is only one characteristic of each individual human being, language and labels reflect those beliefs through the use of people first language and reference to all students belonging to the school community.

For too long, people who happen to have conditions we call "disabilities" have been subjected to devaluation, marginalization, prejudice, and more. And the first way to devalue someone is through language, by using words or labels to identify a person/group as "less-than," as "the others—not like us," and so forth. Once a person/group has been identified this way, it makes it easier to justify prejudice and discrimination. Our language shapes our attitudes; our attitudes shape our language; they're intertwined. And our attitudes and language drive our actions!

Using People First Language—putting the person before the disability—and eliminating old, prejudicial, and hurtful descriptors, can move us in a new direction. People First Language is not political correctness; instead, it demonstrates good manners, respect, the Golden Rule, and more—it can change the way we see a person.

Least Dangerous Assumption
Beyond Access Model: Promoting Membership, Participation and Learning for Students with Disabilities in General Education Classrooms, Cheryl M. Jorgensen, Michael McSheehan, & Rae M. Sonnenmeier, p. 49-51

The "least dangerous assumption" states that in the absence of absolute evidence, it is essential to make the assumption that, if proven to be false, would be least dangerous to the individual. The "absence of evidence can never be absolute evidence of absence," and as such, it is always safest and most respectful to make the "least dangerous assumption."

Changing our paradigm about intelligence and intellectual disability is central to promoting students' learning, inclusion, achievement and quality of life. Difficulties with demonstrating ability should not be taken as evidence of intellectual incompetence.

- All people have different talents and skills.
- Intelligence is not a one-dimensional construct.
- Intelligence (or its absence) cannot be measured accurately and reliably enough to base students' educational programs and future goals on intelligence test results.
- Students learn best when they feel valued, when people hold high expectations for them and when they are taught and supported well.
- **When we are not sure what a student can learn, presume competence and the ability to learn.**

If schools adopted this paradigm, then the following would be evident:

- Person-first language is used keeping the focus on the person rather than the disability label.
- Language that classifies students based on their functioning or developing level is not used; rather descriptions of student focus on their abilities and needs.
- All students are provided with a means to communicate about the same academic and social topics as their peers without disabilities.
- Annual goals on IPPs reflect content standards from the general education curriculum and functional skills necessary for students to fully participate in the mainstream of school and community life.
- Students are seen as capable of learning the general education curriculum; educators do not predict that certain students will never acquire certain knowledge or skills.
- People speak directly to students rather than speaking to students through a buffer supplied by paraprofessionals or other people who are considered to be assisting the students.
- People use age-appropriate vocabulary, topics, and inflection when talking to students.
- In order to respect privacy, staff members discuss the students' personal care, medical needs and other sensitive issues out of earshot from others and only with those people who genuinely need the information.

Inclusion of students with disabilities is grounded in the presumption that all students are competent to learn the general education curriculum and communicate about social and academic topics commensurate with their same-age peers without disabilities. Presuming that students are competent, however, is not a prerequisite to inclusion. Members of educational teams have a varied set of professional and personal experiences that have informed their beliefs about intelligence, disability, learning and communication. Thus, team members do not need to change their beliefs before including a student but they should adopt behaviours that have been shown to promote the highest level of learning by students. These behaviours are (1) providing students with appropriate supports and a means to communicate about age-appropriate social and academic topics until they are communicating in a way that is commensurate with same-age peers, (2) supporting students to be fully participating members of general education instruction within general education classrooms, and (3) considering the quality of instruction and supports when evaluating students' performance.

Strength Based Approach
Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice: http://cecp.air.org/interact/expertonline/strength/empower/2.asp

> *"We have a choice about how we wish to view the people with whom we work. We can either view them as manifestations of pathology and deficit or we can view them as representing a degree of competence and skill. __We cannot do both.__ Further, if we choose to view them in terms of pathology, then the focus on problems that this perspective requires makes it much more difficult for us to recognize their strengths and resources ... if we choose to view them as competent and resourceful, then our focus on strengths is more likely to obscure their deficits from our view."* (Michael Durrant)

Many schools have adopted a new philosophy that includes conducting periodic student assessments. They place the most emphasis on assessment that discovers students' talents and the conditions under which students perform best. Assessment is done during naturally-occurring situations by familiar people rather than in a "testing room." Information gathered through observation and interview is valued more than information gathered during artificial testing sessions. Assessment reports avoid the use of limiting descriptions (e.g., "falls into the sub-average range of intelligence") and highlights students' abilities and talents.

Strength-based assessment is founded on four important assumptions:
1. Every child, regardless of his or her personal and family situation, has strengths that are unique to the individual.
2. Children are influenced and motivated by the way significant people in their lives respond to them.
3. Rather than viewing a child who does not demonstrate a skill as deficient, it is assumed the child has not had the opportunities that are essential to learning, developing, and mastering that skill.
4. When interventions and service planning are based on strengths rather than deficits and pathologies, children and families are more likely to become involved in the educational process and to use their strengths and resources.

Primary and Secondary Disabilities
http://www.fasdcenter.samhsa.gov/educationTraining/courses/FASDTheCourse/module4/mod4_ct_sd_pg1.cfm

Primary disabilities are characteristics or behaviors that reflect differences in brain structure and function, such as mental retardation, attention deficits, and sensory integration dysfunction. Secondary

disabilities are disabilities that the individual is not born with. These disabilities and behaviors develop over time because of a poor fit between the person and the environment.

It is important to be familiar with the secondary characteristics of a learning disability. These secondary characteristics typically develop as a result of prolonged academic failure and may include:

- low motivation,
- low self-esteem,
- passivity resulting in ineffective strategies in self-regulation and time management,
- learned helplessness,
- poor meta-cognitive skills.

Many secondary disabilities can be lessened or avoided if those working with the child understand the primary disability. They need to modify their approach to support the way the child learns academics and social behavior. It is important to recognize and understand these secondary characteristics of a learning disability, as they contribute to the cycle of academic failure for many students. An awareness of these secondary characteristics enables teachers to work more effectively with students.