Including students with disabilities into the regular classroom

Abstract (summary)

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**Headnote**

Regular classroom teachers are responsible for providing an education program for students with disabilities. The API model presents a model for modifying the classroom academic, physical and interpersonal environment to meet the needs of all students. An API Inclusion Plan helps the classroom teacher organize and manage the modifications needed for each student.

The Education for the Handicapped Children Act (EHCA) passed in 1975 (PL94-142) guaranteed that students with disabilities would receive as much of their education as possible with students who are not disabled. While the intent to educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment is to be commended, historically the success of mainstreaming seemed to be the burden of the student with a disability. If the student's performance in the mainstream did not meet expectations, the student returned to a special education classroom.

Since the passage of amendments to EHCA renaming it to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, schools have taken increased responsibility for providing educational programs for students with disabilities in the general education setting as much as possible. In general, schools have met this requirement by identifying themselves as inclusive and planning for special educators and general educators to work together. However, Fuchs and Fuchs (1994) report that the movement toward inclusion has not always resulted in the cooperation of general education and special education. According to Schrag (1994), not all schools which house students with disabilities include students with disabilities. Snell and Janney (1993) further state that inclusion is not "trying to fit students with special needs into the mainstream; instead it means creating a mainstream where everyone fits." (P. 220). General education classrooms today include students who would not have spent much time there, if any, a few years ago. The challenge is to not just provide housing in a regular classroom but to make the student and the classroom fit. Providing a comfortable fit for the student with a disability is a challenge to everyone involved.

Best practices recommend that the special educator and the classroom teacher collaborate continually with each taking responsibility to provide a successful experience for the student (Bauwens & Hourcade, 1995; Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend, 1989; Friend & Cook, 1992). However, because of scheduling factors and a nationwide shortage of special educators, this model may not always exist in its purest form. Although the special and general educators may collaborate on a plan, the regular classroom teacher is often responsible for ultimately implementing educational plans for children with disabilities. In this case, teachers in the general education setting can find assurance in recognizing that they already have skills for successfully including students with disabilities into their classrooms. Teachers routinely make modifications for all students in order to meet individual differences, and modifications for students with disabilities are often just more specific and extensive. If planned and implemented according to the individual learning characteristics of students within a heterogeneous classroom, differentiated instruction benefits all students.

The key to success for differentiated instruction is communication between the regular and the special educator. Although the regular and special educator may not have as much time to collaborate as they would like, the general education teacher is able to independently continue a program for children with disabilities. The problem for the general educator seems to be one of managing the accommodations and adaptations needed. The management of modifications to the academic environment is only one issue. The student with a disability may also bring interpersonal and behavioral issues to the classroom.There are steps that general educators, who already differentiate instruction for students in the classroom, can take to meet the needs of students with disabilities. These steps may be beneficial to teachers in the general education setting who do not have the availability of a special educator to the maximum extent desired.

One approach to making certain that all students receive appropriate instruction is to look at the needs of students with a disability within the framework of a model that evaluates the environments impact on learning. This plan focuses on the academic, physical, and interpersonal (API) environments. All three environments affect not only the learning of the student with the disability but also the dynamics of the classroom and the ultimate welfare of each student in the classroom. There is some overlap among the three environments because a classroom has many activities going on simultaneously. For instance, breaking up time periods for a student with a short attention span may result in changing the academic environment in terms of length of assignment, the physical environment in terms of allowing the student freedom to move around, and the interpersonal environment in terms of providing the student in a self-monitoring program with a goal of increasing time spent working on a project. A general plan for inclusion that provides attention three environments for each student with disabilities may help the teacher to manage accommodations and adaptations.

Academic Environment

Students with disabilities often experience difficulty in demonstrating mastery of the general education program. They may be in classrooms where they lack the prerequisite skills to meet the objectives of the curriculum as written, or they may not be successful in demonstrating their achievement with the type of evaluation procedure used. These two issues can be addressed with differentiated instruction which allows for modification of curriculum and classroom assessment.

Modifications in the area of curriculum may include:

Modification of abstract content to complex, complex to simple, and variable content of predictable content, amount of content reduced, content paraphrased to an easier reading level, reorganized content, questions written at different levels, cueing the student when you will call upon them, wait time, use of Think-Pair Share, Every Pupil Response, various levels of thinking requirements required Note takers, graphic organizers for note taking or following of presentation, directions orally and in written form, pacing variety, active involvement of student, structure, direct use of open ended questioning, student choice Strategy instruction, mnemonics and other memory aids, supervised practice

Computer-assisted instruction, calculator, use of manipulatives

Modifications in the area of classroom assessment may include:

Differentiated learner outcomes (e.g.) student completes 5 instead of 10 problems

Alternative response format such as allowing students to record answers or use computer to write answers Portfolio assessment

Multiple assessment procedures

Learning contracts

Rubrics

Performance demonstrations

Use of calculator or manipulatives

Teacher made tests

Freqent feedback, both oral and written

Instruction in test taking skills

Adapted tests

Open book exams, extended time, test divided into blocks of time, a reader to read the test aloud, opportunity for student to give answers orally, administration of test in small groups, take home tests, test item/section points and weighting guidelines, reduced reading level of exam (paraphrase), use of fewer essay items, highlighted instructions, a list of correctly spelled test responses (Curran, Eckart, Little, Moore, & McCarty,1994).

Physical Environment

The student may require changes in the physical environment. Some of these changes, such as providing freedom from distracting noises, may need attention more often, while others such as providing seatoften, while others such as providing seating close to the teacher may only require attention during story time.

Modifications to the physical environment may include:

Additional space for the student's equipment, for the student to spread out work, or for the student to work quietly

Additional equipment - (e.g.. laptop computer, tape recorder)

Accessibility to needed materials such as notes on the overhead, visual representation of subject of oral presentation, more detailed classroom procedures, NCR paper for note takers, manipulatives, books and materials written at an appropriate reading and interest level

Seating (e.g.. close proximity to board, screen, charts, preferential seating) Room arrangement to allow for easy flow of traffic, i.e. wheelchair, removal of distractions or minimizing them as much as possible, proper lighting, flexibility in dress allowed to account for temperature changes

No amount of adaptation t the curricular material will be successful if the student is limited by the physical environment. Attention to the physical environment can make it more likely that student adaptations in other areas will be successful.

Interpersonal Environment

The student may need changes to the interpersonal environment. The interpersonal environment affects relationships within the classroom community. Communication between teacher and students, both in written and oral form, and communication between fellow classmates are part of the interpersonal environment. Students with disabilities need to feel comfortable in the classroom, and problems getting along with others can have a negative impact on efforts to improve academic performance. In addition, students having difficulties in the interpersonal area will have an effect on the group dynamics in the classroom. The availability of resources is important to determine, but the teacher also has skills in this area that can prove to have an effect on the group dynamics in the classroom. The adaptations in this area can prove beneficial to success.

Modifications to the interpersonal environment may include:

Peer buddies

Cooperative learning groups

Role models

Input from the parents as adaptations are tried

Less emphasis on competition in which the student has no chance to win

Increased emphasis on collaboration and team work

Opportunities and reinforcement for participation

Encouragement for appropriate student behavior

Individualized behavior management plans

Opportunities for success

Instruction in problem solving and selfmonitoring

Opportunities to learn through role playing and simulations

Clear expectations

A nurturing, safe, and comfortable environment

Simulations

Two of the recommended modifications commonly used are peer buddies and cooperative learning groups. There are some cautions which should be noted in using these two approaches. When using a peer buddy the student with a disability must agree to work with a peer buddy, and the peer buddy must agree to serve in that capacity. Further, the peer buddies must be trained and provided ongoing supervision. If evaluation indicates either party is dissatisfied, the arrangement should be ended (Fulton, 1994; Salend, 1994).

While cooperative learning groups have proven an effective means to improve the interpersonal skills of students with disabilities, it is important that the student with a disability receive instruction in how to work cooperative by not to always assign the student to the same group and to compliment the student for efforts at getting along with the cooperative learning group (Salend, 1994).

Although three environments affecting students have been described here, it should be noted that there may be overlap among the areas for many of the suggestions. For instance, cooperative learning groups can be used to modify the academic, physical, and interpersonal environments. This will be true for many of the suggestions. The area in which the modification is placed is not so important as the fact that all three areas have been considered in educational decision-making.

Managing Differentiated Instruction for Students with Disabilities

Difficulties students experience in any of these three environments will not only produce achievement problems for them, but the situation will affect the classroom as a whole. For instance, the student who is having difficulty reading the assignment may become a disturbance to the students around him or her. The overlap among physical, academic, and interpersonal environments creates a special challenge to the teacher. After collaborating with the special educator as to how to meet the student's needs, the teacher is often left to implement a plan without the benefit of immediate feedback from the special educator. The Academic, Physical and Interpersonal Inclusion Plan (API Inclusion Plan), (See Figure1) provides for modifications in all three environments. Information is obtained from the special educator, the parents and the student. The group looks at strengths as well as needs.

The steps involved in this process include:

Step 1. Gather information about the student's levels of performance in all areas including use of academic and behavioral strategies.

Step 2. Obtain information about IEP considerations and discuss the logistics for implementing them.

Step 3. Obtain information about the student's health and any special interests.

Step 4. Using the API Inclusion Plan, the special and regular educator meet with the team to determine and agree upon adaptations and accommodations to the academic, physical, and interpersonal environment.

Step 5. Implement the plan.

Step 6. The special educator and regular educator confer with the student and the student's parents to evaluate the value of the plan to the student's success.

Step 7. Revise the plan if necessary.

IEP's are cumbersome and the content is not subject specific. The availability of the special educator determines how much responsibility for the plan the regular educator assumes. The completed API Inclusion Plan provides a summary of information in areas that directly affect classroom performance. Brief information regarding the following areas is included:

the student's level of academic and behavioral performance including strategies the student uses, IEP considerations, health concerns, special interests, academic environment needs, physical environment needs, and interpersonal environment needs. It can be adapted to different classes. For instance, the student may need a note taker in social studies but not in science. The API Inclusion Plan format is a useful communication tool for the teachers, parents, and student.

In summary, the use of the API Inclusion Plan does not take the place of on-going collaboration among regular and special educators, but it does provide a structured approach educators may use in providing differentiated instruction. The initial API Inclusion Plan is completed at the IEP meeting with the educator helping to complete it. Figure 2 presents API Inclusion Plan for a child at the primary level who needs few modifications, and Figure 3 presents an API inclusion plan for a child at the elementary level whose needs are more complex. The format is helpful in organizing the modifcations the regular teacher can provide. Not only will students with IEP's benefit from a plan such as this that takes into account the various environments, but atrisk students or students who have not yet been identified as having a disability may also benefit from these modifications. The use of the plan and the detail of the plan will be based on the level of need. Teachers already have the skills to meet he needs of all students. The needs of students with disabilities may seem overwhelming to educators, but the requirements of the classroom also may appear overwhelming to the student with a disability. This plan provides help to both parties. The desired result is that the student with a disability will not only be housed in general education but will also fit.

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