Special Education is Not a Place: Avoiding Pull-Out Services in Inclusive Schools

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Since the inception of inclusive schooling, teachers have worked hard to provide students with disabilities access to both a typical education in the general education classroom and to the individual supports and services they need to find success in that classroom. In many classrooms, however, educators stumped at how to do both resort to pulling students out of the classroom for short bits of instruction, or in some cases, for large periods of the school day.

Clearly, some students need special tutorials, individualized instruction, extra skill practice, or reinforcement of key concepts. Removing students from their classrooms to receive these supports, however, may not be necessary. Some educators and scholars have argued that pulling students out of their general education classroom is necessary if students are to get the individual support they need while others insist that students lose access to general education curriculum, instruction, incidental learning, and social skills when they leave their classroom and that the potential benefits of pull-out services are not worth the cost of leaving. Perhaps educators do not need to debate these points; teachers may not need to choose between personalized instruction and a general education experience. In today's inclusive classrooms, students can often get both. In this article I explore three questions teachers often ask about pull-out services and personalized instruction and suggest a variety of ways in which students can receive appropriate instruction alongside peers without disabilities in general education classrooms.

How Can Students Get Personalized Instruction In the Inclusive Classroom?

Many students with disabilities are pulled from their general education classrooms because teachers feel they need a more individualized learning experience than can be provided in a general education setting. It is certainly true that many students with academic needs and learning differences require individual or small group help or individualized teaching strategies. However, teachers must always consider the answers to the following questions when planning individual instruction:

- How can this support be delivered in the most effective and meaningful way?
- Does the student need to leave the general education environment for this instruction?
- If the student leaves the classroom for instruction, what will he or she gain? What will he or she lose?
- Can the student get the content or strategies he or she needs without losing access to the general education classroom?

If after addressing those questions, the team determines the learner *would* profit from the general education classroom experience, the following strategies can help educators provide personalized instruction in those inclusive environments:

Co-Teaching

When two teachers are available to deliver instruction, roles can be differentiated, the teacher to student ration goes down, and instruction can be tailored to meet the needs of a wider range of students. During student work time, instructors can move through the classroom addressing the needs of individual learners and providing extra enrichment or help as needed.

Station Teaching

Using stations or center-based instruction is one way busy classroom teachers individualize instruction for all. This model is also often used by co-teaching teams. During a stations teaching model, students in the class can be instructed to visit some or all of the stations, depending on individual goals and needs and teachers can design tasks at stations that give students opportunities to tackle individual goals and learn new skills.

Integrated Therapy

When therapists, social workers, counselors, and other related services professionals enter general education classrooms, all learners benefit. When Tyler, a student with autism, began receiving his speech and language supports in his first-grade classroom, he was able to study the same stories as his peers while gaining much-needed competencies in the areas of articulation and language development. Tyler's speech therapist also profited from this experience as she began to function as an instructor for a small group of six-year-olds; she learned new ways to teach Tyler communication skills and, after observing the classroom teacher, she discovered new ways to teach using standards-based and curriculum-based strategies.

Independent Instruction

In some instances, students are pulled from their classes to learn new skills, other times they are pulled to practice skills that have already been introduced. There are many ways learners can direct their own learning- by selecting work from in a teacher-created study folder, by “testing” themselves using flashcards, individual games (e.g., crossword puzzles, memory games); workbooks, activity kits, or computer programs.

Peer-Support

Before students are pulled out for instruction or skill practice, teachers should always consider the possibility of using peer support or tutoring to meet student needs. One school responded to the need for individual support by pairing all students with a partner for a part of the school day that was challenging and novel- working with technology. Both students were learning something new so neither one had more knowledge or skill than the other. In another classroom, teachers used cross-age tutors to support their classrooms. Sixth-grade students came into the fourth-grade classroom twice a week and helped struggling readers write their own books.

Study/Work Time

In almost every classroom (including those in secondary schools), teachers designate some part of the school day or week for individual work, project-based work, or partner learning. If teachers plan together up front, this can be a time where any learner in the classroom can meet with a teacher (special educator, speech therapist, enhancement/gifted education teacher, reading specialist, parent volunteer, community mentor, cross-age tutor).

How Will Students Learn Functional Skills In the Inclusive Classroom?

One reason students are pulled out is to give them instruction they may not be able to receive in the general education classroom. This is primarily a concern of teachers in secondary schools, but teachers of learners in lower grades may struggle with it as well. When educational teams target functional skills as a priority, a number of questions should be asked and answered:

- What functional skills are critical for this learner's success?
- Where can these skills be taught/learned?
- If we pull students from coursework to learn functional skills, what do we potentially give up?
- Do we need to give up academic instruction or typical school experiences to get functional skill instruction?

There are several ways to address the need for functional skills. Perhaps the most obvious way to get students the skills they need is to explore ways for students to get this practice in typical school coursework or by being very inventive with a student's course schedule. For instance, one 18-year-old high school student needed to learn money/change making skills so he spent two high school periods working in the school store with other students from his business and marketing class. Another student who needed a lot of assistance with self-care (and enjoyed athletics), was scheduled for two different physical education classes – swimming and volleyball. She not only learned two life-long leisure activities but was able to receive instruction in dressing, applying make-up, washing, and other self-care

skills on a regular basis. She also learned how to engage in relaxing stretching exercises as a way to manage stress.

What Will Students with Disabilities *Do* During Traditional Whole-Class Instruction?

A common question teachers ask is, “What do we do with students during lectures?” Recognizing how difficult it is for some students to sit in their seats and actively listen for fifteen minutes to an hour or more at a time, teachers pull students out to engage in learning experiences that are more active, meaningful, and geared to the student's individual goals.

Because so many students with disabilities do struggle to participate during a traditional lecture format, this approach certainly seems reasonable. It ignores, however, a larger educational problem- that is, many many students (those with and without disabilities) struggle to attend to a traditional lecture or whole-class discussion and need opportunities to move, share, interact, and process in order to learn. If students with disabilities are learning in classrooms where the predominant teaching model is lecture and whole-class discussion, then the teaching team needs to brainstorm new ways of providing instruction to *all* students instead of identifying those who will most obviously struggle and leaving the rest to navigate the lesson on their own.

Consider the success one secondary teaching team experienced when they made small shifts away from whole-group instruction (Kluth, 2003). Anne, a woman with autism, did not have a reliable communication system and she often vocalized audibly during classes. Her American History teacher was frustrated with her presence in the classroom; the teacher was a popular and animated instructor but he had been using the same lessons for several years and was not prepared to make changes “just for one student”.

Anne's teacher, a special educator, offered to work with the history teacher to create opportunities for Anne to participate in his lessons. The class was studying the Vietnam conflict; in order to teach this particular unit, the teacher was using a history textbook, a range of popular films (e.g., *Apocalypse Now* , *Born on the Fourth of July* , and *Platoon*), newspaper clippings from the late 1960s and early 1970s, and a few fictitious accounts of the war. While the materials were varied and interesting to most of the students, the teaching style was not. This dynamic instructor, although very funny and entertaining, delivered instruction through a lecture format every day. While students did have opportunities to ask and answer questions during the lectures, they were not able to interact with each other, explore materials in-depth, solve problems independently, or create products. While some students could stay attentive during a lecture format, many others, including Anne, could not. By the end of the daily lecture, many students were falling asleep, writing notes to friends, or staring out the classroom's large wall of windows.

The special educator suggested that once a week, while the teacher was showing a movie, the students in the class would be offered an alternative activity. The teachers decided to collaborate on the activity. One teacher, they decided, would stay back in the classroom and supervise the movie viewing while the other teacher would accompany a small group of students around the large high school, seeking faculty, staff members, and other adults in the school who would be willing to be interviewed about their memories of the Vietnam era. For the first few weeks, the special educator took the students on the school tour; five students including Anne marched through the halls, visited the teacher's lounge, and even canvassed the main office looking for family members who might be visiting the school. Since Anne could not speak, her job was to operate the tape recorder (a new skill), introduce the group to the adult (via a communication card reading “We are conducting a history project related to the Vietnam conflict. We are interested in interviewing people who remember the Vietnam era. Do you mind if we ask you a few questions?”). Anne also participated in the interview process by handing question cards to the adults being questioned.

Both educators were pleased with the unit and the history teacher claimed that all of his students learned more, even those who could “handle” the lectures. He saw more complexity in all of his learners and felt that the interview activity allowed him to tackle more complicated topics and give students more opportunities to think critically. He didn't have Anne in any of his classes the next semester, but he did continue to use the interviewing project as a central focus of the unit. In subsequent semesters, all students worked in groups to choose a specific focus for their interviews (e.g. combat, on the home

front, American politics during the Vietnam era) and to design questions. Further, students were no longer asked to skip the film while conducting interviews; all learners went out into the school and neighboring community during the class period.

Conclusions

Too often students with disabilities are marginalized and viewed as “the other”. This perspective has been perpetuated through the use of the pull-out system. Pull-out services reinforce differences and, more importantly, interrupt the typical experiences necessary for social skill acquisition, life-skill learning, and scholastic success. By creatively considering a variety of ways to personalize instruction in classrooms, teaching functional skills in the context of general education classes, and providing a wider range of instructional options for all students, however, educators can minimize pull-out services and give students access to individualized instruction, social experiences, collaborative opportunities, and academic curricula.

References

P. Kluth (2003). “You're going to love this kid”: Teaching students with autism in the inclusive classroom . Baltimore: Brookes Publishing

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