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Academic Diversity: Reading Instruction for Students with Special Needs

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ABSTRACT

Provisions to assure that all children are provided quality reading instruction have always been a concern for classroom teachers. Today, greater sensitivity to learners with special needs has led to their inclusion in regular classrooms for the full instructional day. Implications for the reading instructional program are clear; it must employ a variety of instructional and organizational techniques to suit a wide range of student abilities. This article addresses legislation that led to the present focus on classroom inclusion for students with special needs and accommodation of the students with special needs in the classroom reading program. Particular discussion is focused on children who are diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and children identified as intellectually gifted. Specific recommendations and examples are given that will help these children reach their full academic potential and allow them to experience success in a regular classroom reading program.

Special students are those who have unique needs. Included in this group are physically, emotionally, or learning disabled, as well as gifted students. In this article we provide: 1) an overview of legislation that led to the present focus on classroom inclusion for students with special needs; and 2) a discussion of the special needs reflected in classroom reading programs, focusing on attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and giftedness. We chose to discuss the special needs of these children to illustrate the range of academic diversity within reading programs that truly embrace an inclusionary model of instruction.

Addressing individual student needs in reading instruction has always been an immense responsibility for teachers of reading. Providing appropriate reading instruction that meets the needs of

individual students within a group demands many lengthy hours of preparation by teachers. Classroom teachers have continually adapted their instruction to accommodate an ever expanding and changing group of students. Today, with the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), teachers are further searching for effective means to provide relevant reading education for students with special needs.

Legislation That Created Change

In 1975, the passage of P.L. 94-142 (the Education for all Handicapped Children Act) occurred. This was a significant change for education in the United States. P.L. 94-142 affected the placement of students with disabilities by allowing them to be mainstreamed into regular classrooms. The act clearly indicated that children with disabilities must be placed in the least restrictive environment, which was interpreted, in many cases, as the same environment as for regular students. The trend to educate children with disabilities in the closest possible proximity to the regular classroom in which they can succeed has been referred to as mainstreaming. Lewis and Doorlag (1991) define mainstreaming as "[The] inclusion of special students in the general education process. Students are considered mainstreamed if they spend any part of the school day with regular class peers. In a typical mainstreaming program, special students in regular classrooms participate in instructional and social activities side by side with their classmates. Often they receive additional instruction outside the regular classroom from a special educator such as a [reading] resource teacher" (pp. 3-4).

In 1990, P.L. 94-142 was amended in ways that reflected a more sensitive approach to individual strengths of students rather than highlighting their disability. As part of the concern for the individual, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) has reexamined mainstreaming in general. Mainstreamed students were often involved in pull out programs, such as reading resource instruction in Chapter I. The fragmentation of the school day motivated some concern for the individual student and advanced the question: Is this the best instructional setting to meet academic needs of children with special needs? Thus, this question has led us to seek a more effective academic environment for children with special needs. Greater sensitivity to individual learners with special needs has meant proposing inclusion as a viable solution.

Benefits and Demands of Inclusion

Inclusion means that special needs students are assigned to regular classrooms for the full instructional day and are allowed to participate in all school activities and functions. This type of inclusive atmosphere can provide adequate support systems. IDEA requires

that classrooms must be made physically accessible to accommodate all students with special needs. In addition to physical setting, provisions need to be made for additional personnel, staff development, and technical assistance. This may mean that in addition to the regular classroom teacher a special education teacher is available to co-teach the entire class. A co-teaching arrangement limits the possibility that any child or group of children is singled out as being different because of each teacher teaching only to part of the class. The co-teaching arrangement is a collaborative effort by both teachers in planning, delivering, and evaluating their instruction (Friend and Cook, 1992).

For inclusion to work, teachers need to create a classroom atmosphere where differences are explicitly addressed and discussed by everyone in the class, with teachers modeling appropriate "accepting" behaviors. The intent is to promote a classroom where students become a group continuing to develop as readers, and no student is singled out because he or she is different. Thus, students in the class are as much responsible for the success of inclusion as the classroom and special education teachers. One way to ensure student involvement in the inclusion process is to use cooperative groups as an instructional method. By allowing students to work cooperatively in groups all students share in the contributions to the learning process and are more likely to develop a positive attitude toward individual differences.

Creating a Reading Classroom that Embraces Academic Diversity

The success of students placed in the least restrictive environment depends upon the cooperation of teachers, administrators, specialized personnel, and parents. In essence, however, individual teacher's ability to accommodate all students in the regular classroom determines the success or failure of such efforts.

Implications for the reading instructional program are clear; it must employ a variety of instructional and organizational techniques to suit a wide range of student abilities. A classroom and school environment that encourages the constructive interaction of special need students with regular students must be established. Most children with special needs do not require specialized reading instructional techniques, but need a simple quality reading instruction designed from an assessment of their reading strengths and weaknesses. Indeed, the similarities among special children and typically developing children are greater than their differences. Labeling academically diverse children gives teachers little usable information about how to develop an appropriate instructional program that will work within their reading curriculum. One positive aspect of IDEA is that it shifts the focus away from use of labels toward consideration of students' educational needs.

An individualized education plan (IEP) provides the most appropriate educational program for many students with special needs. An IEP is a written plan for each special child that details his/her instructional program. In accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), the IEP must include the following components:

- 1) The student's present achievement level, including the student's strengths, weaknesses, and learning styles;
- 2) A statement of annual goals and benchmarks that indicate attainment of these goals;
- 3) A list of long-term and short-term instructional goals, including materials, strategies, and assessment measures intended to indicate mastery;
- 4) A statement detailing specific special educational services to be provided to the student and the extent to which the student will participate in the regular classroom;
- 5) Classroom modifications that need to be made in general teaching techniques and content in order for the child to reach his/her potential;
- 6) Identification of the person(s) (or agent) responsible for teaching each objective;
- 7) Project data for the beginning of program services and the anticipated duration of the services.

The IEP is an educational plan that the multidisciplinary team, which includes the school, teachers, children, and parents develop jointly. The basic ingredients of an IEP are not new; they are essentially those of a good teaching plan. It is important to avoid thinking of inclusion (or least restrictive environment) as separate or different from the basic principles associated with any good learning environment. The principles of a quality learning environment include all aspects of an IEP, and thus the process of equal education for all children.

Inclusion of the Attention-Deficit Hyperactive Child

In today's classrooms many children appear to have difficulty staying on task and maintaining attention. Some of these children are diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). It is estimated that approximately three to five percent of the United States school age population is affected by attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ERIC Digest, 1996). This disorder is the most frequently occurring disorder to affect our school age children (Neuwirth, 1994).

According to Fowler (1994) ADHD is a syndrome characterized by having serious and persistent difficulties for the learner in the following three areas: attention span, impulse control, and hyperactivity. ADHD may be a relatively new term, but the disorder has been found in the medical literature for over a 100 years. The American Psychiatric Association, (ERIC Digest, 1994) stated that

in order for a child to be diagnosed with the ADHD a child had to display for 6 months or more at least eight of the following fourteen characteristics prior to the age of seven: 1) Fidgets, squirms, or seems restless; 2) Has difficulty remaining seated; 3) Is easily distracted; 4) Has difficulty waiting turn; 5) Blurts out answers; 6) Has difficulty following instructions; 7) Has difficulty sustaining attention; 8) Shifts from one uncompleted task to another; 9) Has difficulty playing quietly; 10) Talks excessively; 11) Interrupts or intrudes on others; 12) Does not seem to listen; 13) Often loses things necessary for tasks; and 14) Frequently engages in dangerous actions.

ADHD is often a syndrome synonymous with hyperkinesis, a minimal brain disorder, hyperactivity, or learning disability. In the past, these children often spent part or all of their instructional time outside the regular classroom. They may have been placed in a special education classroom, reading clinic or resource classroom, or alternative classroom for children with behavioral problems. Today, these children are included in the regular classroom and are often the most academically capable in reading when their special needs are met.

One need is frequently met when physicians prescribe stimulants, such as Ritalin, to help reduce hyperactivity, and improve the student's ability to focus, work and learn. According to Neuwirth (1994) the use of medication has sparked quite a debate. Many critics argue that medication is often prescribed unnecessarily and that some students on medication may experience weight loss, grow at slower rates and have difficulty with their sleep patterns. Historically, many children with ADHD have been helped tremendously with proper medication. If physicians carefully monitor a child's height, weight, and overall development the use of medication to help control ADHD is beneficial to the student and the positive results far outweigh the potential side effects

Teachers can also meet the needs of ADHD children through behavioral support by creating an environment conducive to academic performance. Such an environment is crucial for literacy instruction because students need to devote full attention to comprehending, writing, and learning from meaningful text. Teachers who give careful consideration to the following environmental features will facilitate ADHD students' learning:

- Seat students with ADHD near the teacher's desk but include them as part of the regular class seating;
- Place ADHD students up front with their back to the rest of the class to keep other students out of view;
- Surround ADHD students with good role models, preferably students whom they view as friends or whom they respect as learners;
- Support and encourage peer tutoring and cooperative and collaborative learning;

- Avoid distracting stimuli. Do not place students with ADHD near air conditioners, high traffic areas, heaters, doors, or windows;
- Avoid or minimize transitions, physical relocation (monitor them closely on field trips), changes in schedule, and disruptions;
- Create a stimuli-reduced study area. Let all students have access to this area so the students with ADHD are not singled out as being different;
- Provide parents with suggestions on how to establish study routines, develop review of completed homework, projects, and notebooks, and organization of materials at home; and
- Solicit from parents information about what works well for them to help their child stay on task and respond positively to new situations. Valuable insight can be gained by maintaining ongoing contact so that both teachers and parents can learn and support each other's efforts to meet the educational, social, and emotional needs of the child.

Classroom environment is crucial to helping students with ADHD be productive members of the classroom. Predictability and a structured environment enhance students' ability to focus attention on instructional features. The following instructional guidelines are easily applied in a variety of literacy settings:

- Maintain eye contact with the child during verbal instruction;
- Present directions in a clear and concise manner. Daily directions should be consistent and as predictable as possible;
- Clarify complex directions and avoid multiple commands;
- Help students feel comfortable with seeking assistance; and
- Gradually reduce teacher support, however, these children may need teacher support for a longer period of time than other children.

Teachers who modify their reading instruction to meet the needs of the ADHD children will help these students realize their full academic potential and allow them to experience success in a regular classroom. As many elementary teachers have come to realize, the ADHD child is often academically gifted, which increases the breadth of teachers' responsibility for providing an appropriate reading instructional program.

Inclusion of the Academically Gifted Child

Commissioner of Education, Sidney Marland (1972) defined the gifted and talented as "those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society"(p. 16). The U.S. Office of Education identified six

areas of giftedness: 1) general intellectual ability; 2) specific academic aptitude; 3) creativity; 4) leadership ability; 5) ability in the visual or performing arts; and 6) psychomotor ability. Gifted students may demonstrate capability of exceptional performance in only one or two areas.

With specific reference to reading abilities, Shaughnessy, Siegel, & Stanley (1994) and Dooley (1993) noted that gifted students' cognitive skills are advanced beyond the activities and materials normally provided for students at their age and grade level. Gifted students may demonstrate some or all of the following characteristics:

- A rich, well-developed vocabulary and interest in words.
- An advanced linguistic ability in sentence construction, expression of ideas, and listening vocabulary.
- An interest in library books and reading in a variety of topics.
- Frequent use of information sources, such as the dictionary, encyclopedia, information text, and computer software to explore ideas and areas of interest.
- An enhanced ability in the area of critical thinking.
- An inquisitive nature to learn.

Identifying gifted children and designing a curriculum to accommodate their learning needs should be accomplished through a variety of formal and informal assessment procedures. Standardized achievement tests, intelligence tests, creativity measures, actual student performance in the reading program, peer nomination procedures, and parent and teacher observations are avenues to employ for this purpose. Giftedness is also not reserved for any one group or class of children. Teachers should not be preoccupied with ethnicity or social characteristics when identifying the gifted and talented. When identifying giftedness in children who speak a language other than English, it is important to employ informal and first language assessment procedures.

For too long, gifted children were expected to be silent and follow along with the regular curriculum designed for less able students. Today's reading teachers and program administrators realize that gifted children have unique needs, as do all students, and require different instructional programs, practice, and support. Gifted readers are not all the same; each has unique strengths and may have specific weaknesses. Thus, they need the same diagnostically based instruction afforded all learners (Shaughnessy, Siegel, and Stanley, 1994).

Meeting the Needs of the Gifted Reader in the Classroom

There are several avenues available to meet gifted readers' needs in the classroom. One way to enhance the gifted students reading performance is to make use of curriculum compacting (Dooley, 1993). Curriculum compacting assures student mastery of basic skills at a proficient rate in order to make time for enrichment and acceleration. Teachers develop assessment measures that will allow

them to identify acquired skills and capabilities in content areas related to the next reading unit. Once mastered skills and content have been identified, the teacher does not provide instructional activities in those areas. This instructional model allows the teacher to concentrate on underdeveloped skills and provide additional enrichment activities and allows the gifted student to progress at an appropriate pace (Dooley, 1993).

Two other instructional approaches for the gifted child are content and process modification (Dooley, 1993). Content modifications enable the gifted reader to read more complex and in-depth selections. The selections that the gifted student reads can be related to the same theme, topic or genre of the regular classroom instruction. For example, if students were studying World War II, all students might be encouraged to read *The Diary of Anne Frank* during reading instruction. In addition to *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the gifted child might also read *Zlata's Diary* so he/she has the opportunity to make connections between the way Jewish people of Nazi Germany suffered and the way the Bosnians of Sarajevo suffered. These types of content modifications allow gifted students more control over their academic content.

Process modifications require students to use higher level processes to become critical readers, and to enhance their abilities to make judgments about the authenticity, accuracy, and validity of what they read. One way to help all students become more creative and critical readers is by effective questioning strategies, use of reading guides, and integration of writing with reading. Integrating writing and reading to promote the development of critical thinking can be accomplished by teaching writing as thinking process (Jampole, Konopak, Readence, & Moser, 1991). Developing writing skills as a logical thinking process enables gifted students to refine, synthesize, and elaborate upon their understanding of a particular topic.

Application in the classroom and observation support instructional practices such as compacting the curriculum, modifying content, and modifying process; however, many teachers do not use these approaches. One underlying reason for this lack of implementation may be their concern for efficient classroom management. Teachers may ask themselves how can I organize and plan for a high percentage of academically engaged time for my diverse students? Curriculum compacting assesses every child; by determining the needs of all students, time is freed for enrichment activities. Teachers who maximize effective use of content and process modifications are not adding more work to their instructional day, rather they are actually enhancing the content of what they are teaching.

Gifted students learn material faster than other learners and may require less practice and fewer application activities. Providing such differentiated instruction requires diagnosis of students' strengths

and weaknesses. To provide the decisive and most effective lessons for gifted students the teacher must consider their abilities, needs and interests. Once again, this should not be considered an extra burden to the teacher. Instead, it should be considered part of the daily instructional practice that the teacher uses with all students.

SUMMARY

The ability to deal effectively with student diversity is crucial to teaching reading. A key to successful inclusion of students with special needs is recognizing and addressing their concerns in the regular classroom. The ability of teachers to handle differences effectively translates into instructional practices that provide for each student's self-respect and lead all students to feel secure in the classroom (Heilman, Blair, & Rupley; 1998).

Students who have special needs are increasingly taught in the least restrictive environment, which often means the regular classroom. Mainstreaming and inclusion provide the most appropriate education for each student in the least restrictive setting. Inclusion considers the educational needs of students rather than their clinical labels. A major ingredient of the legislative mandate for mainstreaming is the development of an individualized education plan (IEP) for each student with disabilities. The regular classroom teacher's total involvement in the team process is foremost in the successful implementation of the IEP. All students would benefit from the same individual approach to learning that students with special needs receive.

ADHD is one of the most common disorders among children, and on the average, at least one child in every classroom in the United States has this disorder. While at times this disorder can be frustrating and disruptive to the classroom teacher, there are effective environmental and instructional strategies that the teacher can take advantage of to ensure a successful learning climate for the child with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. This is particularly important because many students with ADHD are also academically gifted.

Reading curricular goals are the same for gifted students as for all readers. Accommodating the needs of the gifted learner is best accomplished by modifying the content, methodology, and instruction for gifted readers. A wide variety of theme literatures can be used to tap gifted students' abilities and interests. Availability of books ranging from award winning literature to popular serials is a primary ingredient in creating the successful literacy experience for gifted readers.

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