

Including Paraeducators in the Discussion on Inclusive Practices: Defining the Vocabulary

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School systems in Virginia work hard to provide an appropriate education for students with disabilities. A student's educational program is determined by that student's IEP team, based on data and other pertinent information that has been collected on the student's present level of academic functioning. Together with a student's individual needs, the team must keep in mind that every student has a right to be provided access to the general curriculum. In other words, ALL students must be given the opportunity to meet the standards that the Commonwealth of Virginia has set as important to a high quality education. Many students with IEPs can successfully learn alongside their peers in the same setting, particularly if they receive instruction in a way that meets their specific learning needs. When all students are receiving the same effective instruction, all are being given the same opportunities to learn. This move towards inclusive schooling, where all students have their learning needs met in the same setting, is happening throughout Virginia.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) have recently prompted educators to take a closer look at policies and procedures related to the opportunity for all students to have access to the general curriculum. If ALL students must meet the high educational standards set by federal legislation, and if ALL students must be afforded access to high quality learning opportunities, it is critical that we reflect on how we define practices that lead to effective instruction, particularly for students with diverse needs. Since paraeducators are an important part of many teaching teams that support students with disabilities, it is necessary that they be included in the discussion on effective inclusive practices.

It is often the case that inclusive practices are described using terms that carry different meaning for different people, and may even carry meaning that is site/school-specific. Marilyn Friend (2007) suggests that school

personnel define the vocabulary used in talking about inclusive schooling. Without a shared vocabulary, it is difficult to move forward in developing, implementing, and evaluating effective inclusive practices. The following is a list of basic terms with which you should be familiar. These terms and concepts, as defined by Friend in her presentations to Virginia's principals in January through March of 2007, are relevant to the current-day practices of working with students with disabilities in today's schools.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

This legislative term is used to describe the setting, closest to the educational setting of a student's nondisabled peers, in which a student with disabilities should be taught. It is the educational environment identified for a particular student where, with appropriate supports and services, he can be successful.

Mainstreaming

This was the initial interpretation of LRE. Students received their education with peers if they could achieve at the same level. For some students, mainstreaming occurred in art, music, and physical education, and subject content was delivered in a special education classroom.

Inclusion

This term is at the heart of inclusive schooling for students. Friend (2007) states that inclusion is a philosophy or set of beliefs based on the idea that all students, including those with disabilities, have a right to be full members of classroom communities, whether or not they can meet the "traditional expectations" of those classrooms. When educators begin the work of becoming a school where inclusive practices are effective and pervasive, they must ensure that this philosophy is reflected in their mission statement. Additionally, this philosophy of inclusion should be evidenced in both curricular as well as extra-curricular, schoolwide activities.

Integration

Integration includes three important components: physical integration, instructional integration, and social integration.

The physical integration of students refers to the practice of educating students with disabilities in their neighborhood schools. Students attend classes with their nondisabled peers. Students with more disabilities who need significant support that cannot be done within the typical classroom environment may receive some services in another appropriate setting.

Instructional integration of students occurs when students with disabilities receive their education in the same setting as their nondisabled peers. Support is determined by a student's needs and can be accomplished by adapting the curriculum or through use of an alternative curriculum.

Social integration takes place when students with disabilities are full members of a classroom setting. They have their own space (i.e., desks, cubbies, materials, etc.) in the classroom and they are included in all class activities.

If students are socially integrated, they follow the same classroom rules as their nondisabled peers, receive the same consequences for their behavior, and are always a part of the "social network" of the group of students in the class.

Co-teaching

This is a common option used in inclusive schools. A co-teaching model begins with two or more educators sharing the responsibility for a diverse group of students. This practice enables the teachers to combine their expertise on content knowledge and learning

strategies for the routine development of differentiated instructional plans where all students have the opportunity to be successful.

These concepts and terms are important to the initial discussion about inclusive practices. All school staff must have a common understanding of this vocabulary in order to lay a strong foundation for building an inclusive school. A helpful resource and one that you might suggest to your teaching team is Marilyn Friend's revised "Power of 2" DVD and facilitator's manual. A copy of this material is available at the VDOE TTAC @ GMU online lending library, which can be accessed at:<http://ttac.gmu.edu>.

References

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