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A Secondary Student Instructional Support Team (ASSIST): Teachers Face the Challenge of Student Diversity

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Abstract

In this article, we argue that there is mounting pressure to find ways to accommodate secondary level students with special needs in the regular classroom. We indicate that various types of teacher teams are growing in popularity and fast becoming legitimate instructional options. Next, we introduce the concept of A Secondary Student Instructional Support Team (ASSIST), to support a "class-within-a-class" comprised on students with special needs. Finally, we suggest that secondary teachers emphasize not only what, but also how to learn, through learning strategy instruction.

Introduction

By tradition, most secondary teachers carry out instruction in isolation, with little or no knowledge of what occurs in their colleagues' classrooms (Goodlad, 1984). Each teacher knows a subject matter to be taught and the strategies with which to achieve the appropriate learner outcomes. Experts in one or two content areas, secondary teachers concentrate on their discipline with little regard for other subjects or relationships across curricular boundaries. This degree of educational autonomy may once have been advantageous; however, an increasingly diverse student population necessitates that we rethink what constitutes the most effective educational arrangement.

In the past, secondary teachers directed their time and attention to those students who performed satisfactorily. Students with significant learning and/or behavior problems were subject to the "refer-and-remove" practices common at the secondary level (Gable & Hendrickson, in press). Today, there is mounting pressure to resist withdrawing students with special needs from mainstream classrooms and placing them in "pull-out" programs (e.g., resource rooms) (Osborne & Dimattia, 1994). Accordingly, the roles and responsibilities of school personnel are undergoing fundamental changes stemming from the challenge to accommodate a diverse student population on a "stay-put" basis (Gable & Hendrickson, in press; Hardeman, Drew, Egan, & Wolfe, 1990; Rogan, LaJeunesse,

McCann, McFarland, & Miller, 1995). As school systems respond to this challenge, various and special education teacher collaborative arrangements are supplanting traditional programs (Friend & Cook, 1992).

In this article, we discuss the challenges associated with instructing a diverse secondary-level student population. We examine the growing use of teams that incorporate teacher support and strategic student intervention. We explore the efficacy of an ASSIST plan for providing regular classroom accommodations, based on the concept of a “class-within-a-class.” We argue that metacognitive strategy instruction is integral to regular classroom instruction of students with special needs. Finally, we offer some thoughts on combining elements of teacher collaboration and learning strategy instruction to increase the quality of secondary instruction for all students.

The Case for Collaborative Teams in Secondary Schools.

Elementary school teachers, even those in traditional self-contained classrooms, generally have accepted if not embraced working with their colleagues in some type of collaborative or teaming arrangement (Gable & Manning, in press). Similarly, middle school teachers recognize that interdisciplinary teamwork is essential to the mission of the middle school (Allen, Splittgerber, & Manning, 1993). With varying degrees of commitment and success, many elementary and middle school teachers are reaping the benefits that accrue from working collaboratively toward common instructional goals. In contrast, in part because of the departmental structure of most high schools, secondary teachers generally are less enthusiastic and less willing to accept collaborative instructional options (e.g., Gable, Arllen, Bailey, & Hendrickson, 1995).

Advantages to Teacher Collaboration

According to the literature, there are several major advantages to educators working in teams. For example, together general and special education teachers are better able to address the content area needs of individual

students. Collaboration can foster a greater sense of shared responsibility for educating a heterogeneous population of students (Friend & Cook, 1992). Partnerships and teaming increases communication across professional disciplines and often serves the collateral function of enlarging the knowledge base and teaching repertoire of participants. Finally, teachers who collaborate with their colleagues are more likely to establish rewarding and long-lasting professional relationships than those who labor in isolation (Idol-Maespas, Lloyd, & Lilly, 1986). Not surprisingly, teacher collaboration is growing in popularity and fast becoming a legitimate instructional option in some school systems.

Class-within-a-Class Collaborative Option

As McLeskey and Pacchiano (1994) point out, the equivocal success of mainstreaming students with mild disabilities can be rectified only by restructuring the regular classroom. A modest but growing body of research testifies to the fact that teacher collaboration is a realistic way to address a range of individual student needs on a “stay-put” basis (Friend & Cook, 1992; Dettmer, Thurston, & Dyck, 1993). In recent years, schools have begun to experiment with collaborative teams and the strategic classroom placement of a select group of special needs students. Assignment to what has come to be known as a “class-within-a-class” is predicated on various factors—the needs of the students, the content of students with disabilities Individualized Educational Plans (IEP), available curricular and instructional options, the absence of severe behavior problems, and previous teacher training and experience with collaboration (Gable, Hendrickson, & Rogan, in press). The actual weight given a specific factor as well as the percentage of students with special needs will vary as schools seek to establish a ceiling on the heterogeneity among students. Some authors assert that 25-40% of the class might be comprised of students selected according to these standards (Little, 1989). Finally, with the increased number of instructional demands, the roster for a class-within-a-class usually contains fewer total students.

The class-within-a-class arrangement is consistent with current reform efforts at the secondary level (McFarland, 1993; Rogan et al., 1995). For instance, general and special education have reason to regularly discuss individual student needs and to share their respective knowledge of curriculum and instruction. Collaborative teams can vary the sub-groups of students that comprise the class-within-a-class according to subject matter and/or changing students instructional needs. Teachers have the option of scheduling time-limited, pull-out instruction for students with and without disabilities. In addition, interacting with two or more supportive adults may mitigate against concerns students have about academic requirements as well as teacher concerns about community building (Gable et al., in press; Little, 1989). A Secondary Student Instructional Support Team (ASSIST) concept is a realistic way to implement the class-within-a-class model to better serve heterogeneous populations of students.

Secondary Student Instructional Support Team (ASSIST)

A Secondary Student Instructional Support Team (ASSIST) serves as an alternative to traditional, pull-out programs for secondary students with mild disabilities. ASSIST generally is comprised of teachers of various subject areas (e.g., social sciences, mathematics, English), along with one or more

specialists (e.g., learning resource or disabilities specialist, speech therapist). Classrooms of teachers participating in ASSIST teams are located in a “cluster” in close physical proximity to each other (Wiedmeyer & Lehman, 1991). Placement of students with special needs or disabilities occurs within and across team-taught classes. This arrangement facilitates the establishment of a positive attachment to the structure and classroom organization of team-mediated instruction and is consistent with block scheduling options (Gable et al., in press). Finally, ASSIST affords the opportunity to provide students a mix of indirect and direct instructional support (see **Figure 1**).

Indirect Instructional Support

According to McFarland (1993), indirect instructional support represents a systemic approach to preparing students to succeed in secondary and post-secondary environments. Indirect collegial support allows teachers to address a wide range of student problems (e.g., failing grades, absenteeism, failure to complete assignments, deficient learning strategies) (McFarland, 1993). ASSIST team support comes from teachers meeting during a common planning period to discuss individual student’s needs. At this time, team members discuss what is to be taught and map out the subject matter. They speculate where particular students might have difficulty and how best to reduce or eliminate those difficulties and then

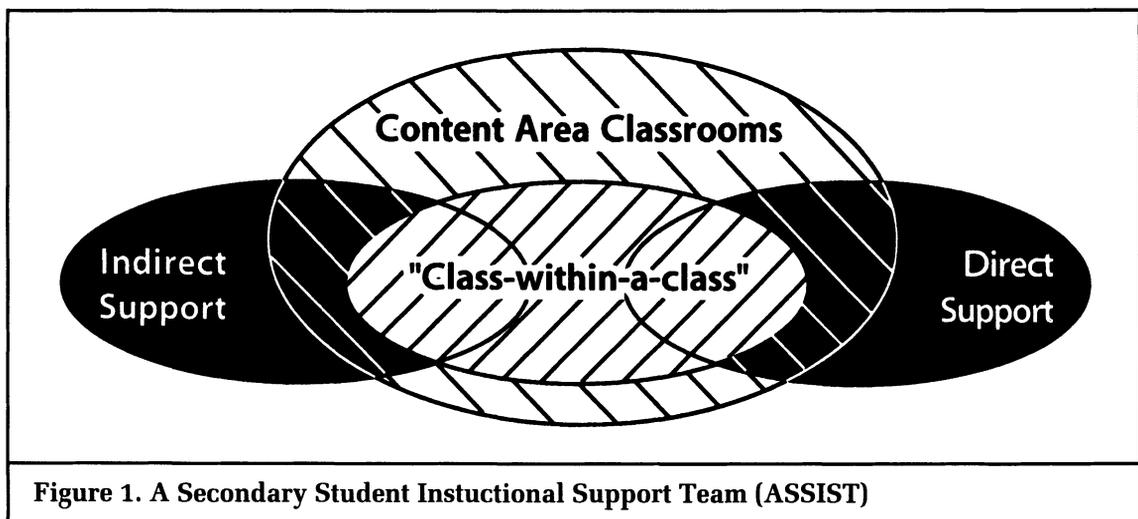


Figure 1. A Secondary Student Instructional Support Team (ASSIST)

devise a written plan. Later, teachers evaluate student mastery and reevaluate the overall effectiveness of the team plan (Gable et al., in press; KU-CRL, 1992).

Instructional accommodations. As Fuchs and Fuchs (1994) assert, a standard curriculum is the focal point of the traditional teaching/learning process. “Teachers feel obligated to teach it, and students are held accountable for learning it” (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994, p. 302). Clearly, not all students possess the skills to master the content of regular classroom instruction; for many students with special needs or mild disabilities the standard curriculum is an anathema (Baker & Zigmond, 1990).

To select the most appropriate instructional accommodations, ASSIST teams examine critically both curricular goals and the needs of individual students. The team members share their knowledge of the student(s) and discusses whether the student(s) is likely to meet the standard expectations of the lesson(s) without assistance. If the team concludes that a student cannot, they determine whether a particular learning strategy and/or curricular accommodation will rectify the difficulty (Gable et al., in press). Finally, the team produces an instructional plan for the student(s) that delineates faculty responsibilities for its implementation and evaluation.

Curriculum-based assessment. To facilitate the evaluation process, instructional support teams incorporate curriculum-based assessment into their daily classroom practices (e.g., Dettmer et al., 1993; Rogan et al., 1995). Curriculum-based assessment is a measurement system that allows teachers to monitor pupil progress in relationship to the content of daily instruction and to make timely instructional modifications (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hamlett, Phillips, & Bentz, 1994). Curriculum-based assessment is advocated as a mechanism for improving the decision-making process of ASSIST teams (Gable et al., in press).

Direct Instructional Support

ASSIST team members not only participate in

planning, but also share in some periods of direct instruction. For example, a world geography teacher and special education teacher may plan a lesson in which they both assume some responsibility for teaching a portion of the content. In a “parallel teaching” arrangement, the teachers divide the class into two groups and provide small group instruction. Teachers may create similar groups or groups that vary in number and/or diversity (Gable et al., in press). For example, the geography teacher might deliver a lecture on the French economy to the majority of students, while the special education teacher instructs a smaller (but more diverse) group of students (Friend & Cook, 1992). Most students who comprise the class-within-a-class may receive instruction from the special educator. However, several regular students may be included in the small group, while some with disabilities may be part of the lecture group and receive special accommodations.

ASSIST teachers address the group-individual instructional needs of students who comprise the class-within-the-class in various ways. For example, teachers can provide multi-level instruction whereby the majority of the class uses grade level material (e.g., eleventh grade geography textbooks) while other students interact with content drawn from a lower-level curriculum or different media (York, Doyle, & Kronberg, 1992). Furthermore, the class-within-a-class students may be required to answer less complex questions and/or respond differently (e.g., orally rather than in writing). Often, ASSIST teachers plan for student-specific overlapping instruction (York et al., 1992). That is, teachers simultaneously teach academic content and work on the development of positive student interactions in a systematic, goal-oriented manner.

Student motivation. Secondary teachers are discovering that various group motivation strategies can boost the positive effects of group-individualized content-area instruction (Rogan et al., 1995). Indeed, there is mounting evidence to support the practical worth of group contingency arrangements (see Litow &

Pumroy, 1975; Slavin, 1991). Furthermore, combining selected group contingencies (e.g., a sub-group of students must all meet a predetermined performance standard) and student team learning activities (e.g., Teams-Games-Tournament) has been shown to have a beneficial effect on the academic achievement of heterogeneous sub-groups of students (see Slavin, 1991). Many secondary teachers make limited use of pupil praise and are quick to relinquish student motivation to the student himself or herself (Hendrickson & Campell, 1988). ASSIST teams can help recognize the power of positive feedback in secondary classrooms.

Learning Strategies Instruction

Research and experience has shown that students with special needs often are deficient in learning and study skills (e.g., Schumaker, Deshler, Alley, & Warner, 1983). As a result, they have difficulty meeting classroom demands and are especially prone to academic failure. The literature suggests that these students need specialized instruction in the use of compensatory learning strategies to meet secondary level expectations for more independent performance (e.g., Rogan et al., 1995).

In most classrooms, teachers accept responsibility for presenting the material for students to learn; however, another approach is to teach students not only what, *but also* how to learn, by instructing them on various learning strategies (Rogan et al., 1995). A learning strategy is defined as what a student thinks and how he or she acts when planning, executing, and evaluating their performance on a learning task (Lenz, Clark, Deshler, & Schumaker, 1988). Again, the goal of direct instructional support is to provide secondary learners a repertoire of problem-solving strategies with which to master the content. An impressive body of research demonstrates that learning strategies and techniques can help students to become more effective, efficient, and independent learners (Schumaker et al., 1983). Accordingly, a learning strategies curriculum is at the center of programs like ASSIST.

Various problem-solving strategies are available to assist students when confronted with instructional demands acquisition, storage, and expression of information. For example, students might prepare for class with PREPARE, study content area material with The Paraphrasing Strategy/RAP, work to retain information with The Vocabulary Strategy/LINCS, remember sets of facts with EASY, or demonstrate in writing that they know the material by using the Paragraph Writing Strategy/SCRIBE (see Ellis & Lenz, 1987).

The aim of strategy instruction is to promote generalization so that a student can apply a strategy whenever and wherever it is needed. In ASSIST strategies instruction, generalization is addressed by: (a) gaining student commitment to learn and to generalizing use of a particular strategy, (b) developing student cognizance of situations in which the strategy can be applied, (c) creating facilitate memory of the strategy, and finally, (e) requiring that the student master the use of the strategy (Rogan et al., 1995). In all, students are systematically taught *when* and *where* to use a particular strategy, *how* to select a particular procedure to reach a predetermined goal, *how* to think about as well as perform the strategy, and *how* to monitor and evaluate its effectiveness.

Within an ASSIST team, content area teachers and specialists can observe students across classrooms and identify those youngsters for whom strategy training and/or accommodations are needed. Learning strategy instruction can occur on a stay-put basis and be given to some or all of the class. Not all secondary teachers have sufficient knowledge or are able to engage in strategic instruction (see Scanlon, Deshler, & Schumaker, 1996). Accordingly, specialists or other teachers sometimes assume responsibility for pulling-out small groups of students for time-limited strategy instruction.

Conclusions

An instructional support team allows professionals from various disciplines to work together to accommodate students with special needs and mild disabilities in the regular

classroom (Rogan et al., 1995). As we have discussed, ASSIST teams are one way to deal with the growing instructional diversity within the secondary schools. However, a paradigm shift to teacher collaboration will not ensure the successful performance of all secondary students with mild disabilities. The success of a program such as ASSIST hinges on a commitment to serving all the students. Furthermore; ASSIST requires strong administrative support, quality staff development, full understanding of participant roles and responsibilities, and realistic program expectations. Finally, support teams should not be seen as a substitute for other services (e.g., resource room programs); rather, they represent one possible option along the continuum of instructional options.

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