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Educating Students with Developmental Disabilities in Typical Classrooms

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What do you call it when a student with a disability is placed in a typical class with an individualized educational plan and support? Do you call it *integrazione scolastica*, *inclusive education*, or something else? Historically, the term integrazione scolastica has been, and continues to be, the terminology of choice among many Italians. Over the past several years inclusive education has emerged as alternative terminology that some scholars have attempted to differentiate from integrazione scolastica, though this has been complicated by the absence of an agreed upon definition of inclusive education in Italy and internationally. The debate about which terminology is preferred has been fueled by: (a) cultural and linguistic issues, (b) whether the terms pertain primarily to students with disabilities or include other populations (e.g., immigrants, children in poverty, speakers of a non dominant language), (c) disagreement about which terminology represents a higher level of practice, and (d) partial, fragmented, or low quality examples that are sometimes mislabeled as integrated or inclusive (Davern et al., 1997). It is not our intention to resolve this definitional issue here.

Regardless of what you call it, how you define it, or which terminology you prefer, what we have learned as is that we agree with Nota, Ferrari and Soresi (2006) who remind us that placement of a student with a disability in a regular class is not sufficient to ensure success and that much work remains to be done so that these students have equitable access to quality education. Our purpose here is to share five interrelated points to facilitate quality education for students with developmental disabilities at the classroom level. Although we hope these are points we can all agree about, minimally we offer these evidence-based points as reflective prompts that teams can use to explore ways to advance local efforts.

Classroom Environment

When you enter a classroom, how quickly can you identify the student with a disability? Is the student's desk or workspace separated from the typical arrangement of the classroom?

Research from the US has identified that many students with developmental disabilities placed in regular classes are physically separated at the back or side of the classroom, often seated with an assistant in close proximity (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli & MacFarland, 1997), substantively separating them from the life of the classroom. This has been a problem for as long as students with disabilities have been placed in regular classes. Biklen (1985) referred to this phenomenon as the "island in the mainstream" (see Figure 1). More recently, D'Alessio (in press; 2011) has identified a similar phenomenon in Italian schools she refers to as "micro-exclusion", where students with disabilities are separated, and potentially isolated, within the class with the insegnante di sostegno or assistant at his or her side, rather than participating in typical class activities facilitated by the classroom teacher.

More productive arrangements involve situating the student in a location among his or her classmates. Sometimes it can be helpful to purposely design the space to reduce the constant presence of a designated support person, thus allowing the classroom teacher and classmates to freely enter the space. For example, simply not placing a chair next to the student for an assistant or specialized teacher to sit in can encourage those personnel to move around the room providing support to other children. Or the support person (e.g., specialized teacher, assistant) can invite classmates into the target student's space when it is appropriate.

It is also important that the student's space in the class is chronologically age-appropriate. The school supplies, instructional materials, and personal items should be consistent with the chronological age of the classmates. Too often students, especially those with intellectual disabilities, have materials that are geared toward much younger children. This should be avoided because it can perpetuate an unhelpful cycle of low expectations and interactions by inadvertently sending the message that this person is like a much younger child. Classmates can be an excellent source of ideas about the social validity of materials and can offer creative alternatives that are age-appropriate. In summary, some of these very basic environmental variables, such as where the student sits, with whom, and what materials they use, can have a powerful impact on facilitating or interfering with class participation, peer interactions, and overall inclusive efforts.

Teacher Engagement

Our experiences and research tell us that possibly the single most important factor affecting the success of a regular class placement for a student with a disability is the extent and quality of engagement the classroom teacher has with the student (Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman & Schattman, 1993). Giangreco, Broer & Edelman (2001) identified a series of characteristics that varied among classroom teachers who were more engaged versus less engaged with their students with disabilities. More engaged teachers: (a) expressed an attitude of ownership for educating their students with disabilities, (b) were knowledgeable about their student's functioning level and learning outcomes, (c) collaborated with the specialized teacher based on clear roles and retained a high level of instructional decision-making pertaining to their students with disabilities, (d) participated in planning and providing instruction directly to the student with a disability at a similar level as they did for students without disabilities, and (f) directed and supervised assistants in the classroom, fading those supports as much as possible over time. Less engaged and disengaged teachers did the opposite to varying extents.

This research also documented that how other personnel are utilized in the classroom may facilitate or interference with desired teacher engagement. For example, when a full-time assistant was assigned to a student with a disability, teachers were less likely to be engaged. But

when the assistant was assigned to provide support to the whole class under the direction of the teacher, the teacher was more likely to be engaged with the student with a disability. These findings may be partially explained by earlier research indicating that ongoing, close proximity of an assistant is likely to create a physical or symbolic barrier to engagement by others, both teachers and classmates (see Figure 2) and lead to a host of unintended detrimental effects (Giangreco et al. 1997).

These findings may be applied beyond assistants to any support personnel in the classroom such as specialized teachers, therapists, or others. So it is vital to establish clear roles that include the curricular and instructional engagement of the classroom teacher as a key component because as the instructional leader in classroom, it is the teacher who sets the example for all students. If the teacher is engaged or disengaged from the student with a disability it sends a powerful message to the rest of the class about how they should behave toward students with disabilities. In addition, as students with disabilities progress through the grades and the curricular content becomes more advanced in a variety of subjects (e.g., foreign language, science, math, language arts), content area teachers bring specific expertise that specialized teachers or assistants cannot be expected to have. By working together they can apply their respective skills to ensure students' access to rich and interesting curriculum.

Conceptualizing Inclusion When a Large Gap Exists

Students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities may present a substantial functioning gap in learning achievement compared to their classmates without disabilities -- this gap tends to increase as students progress through the grades and the curriculum content becomes more advanced. The majority of US students with identified disabilities included in regular classes (e.g., learning disabilities, speech/language impairments) represent relatively small learning gaps, while those with larger gaps (e.g., intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities) more commonly are served in special classes. Conversely, students in Italy with substantial learning gaps are typically placed in regular classes, as are those with smaller leaning gaps (e.g., learning disabled), who are not certified as disabled. Many school personnel around the world find it challenging to conceptualize how a student with a severe intellectual disability can be meaningfully included in a typical class when this functioning gap is large -- it is at these times that inclusive education is put to the test. This issue is important in both countries to ensure quality access to regular class for students who experience these substantial learning gaps.

Without a clear conceptual understanding, when this gap exists a host of undesirable options often are set in motion that ultimately reduce inclusive opportunities including: (a) lowered expectations by limiting student goals in the regular class to social learning outcomes; (b) separation of the student within the classroom to do different work, (c) pulling the student out of class to do different work in a separate space, or (d) having the student spend part of their school day or week away from school at a disability-only setting. Although these actions typically are taken with the best of intentions, there are alternatives we can pursue to more fully leverage the benefits of inclusive schooling.

When students have relatively mild or even moderate intellectual disabilities common approaches such as differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001) and universal design for learning (Rose & Meyer, 2002) can be effective. In these cases, students typically have the same learning outcomes as their classmates and are participating in the same instruction. A bigger challenge comes when the learning outcomes for most of the students do not closely match the needs of the student with a more significant disability. In these cases students with disabilities can be

meaningfully included in regular class activities using partial participation (Ferguson & Baumgart, 1991), multi-level curriculum, and curriculum overlapping (Giangreco, 2007). These approaches provide ways to think about, plan, and implement instruction when students with disabilities have substantially different learning outcomes than their classmates.

At its most basic, partial participation is the notion that students should be involved in whatever parts of the activity they can with adaptations provided as needed -- just because students may not be able to participate in every aspect of an activity does not mean they should be excluded from all of it. Multi-level curriculum and curriculum overlapping share a few common elements: (a) they are designed for mixed-ability groups, (b) students engage in a shared activity (e.g., educational game, lab experiment), and (c) each student has individually appropriate learning outcomes. What distinguishes the two approaches is that within multi-level curriculum all students in the shared activity have learning outcomes in the same curriculum area (e.g., math), even though they have different math outcomes. In curriculum overlapping students have learning outcomes from two or more curriculum areas within the same activity. For example, in a lab group, three students may have grade-level science learning outcomes and the learning outcomes for a student with severe intellectual disabilities may be related to expressive and receptive communication, thus overlapping the curriculum areas of science and communication within the same activity. These approaches require activity-based learning and therefore a shift away from more traditional large group instruction where most students remain passive while a teacher lectures. When instruction is activity-based there are boundless opportunities to creatively address a wide range of learning needs within shared activities (Giangreco, Cloninger, Dennis & Edelman, 2002).

Peer Supports

Peers can offer both planned and incidental opportunities to enhance social and academic learning. Encouraging classmates with and without disabilities to exchange academic, social, and other supports as they work together within shared classroom experiences creates opportunities to extend learning. Facilitating constructive peer relationships is central to establishing a sense of belonging in the classroom that can be foundational to success. A strong research base exists demonstrating the positive impact of peer supports for students with and without disabilities in inclusive classrooms (Carter, Cushing & Kennedy, 2009).

Yet these positive peer interactions can be facilitated or hindered by environmental, curricular, and instructional actions taken by the adults in the classroom. Therefore, it is important to always consider how adult actions might impact peer supports and relationships. School personnel can facilitate peer supports by: (a) identifying students with and without disabilities who might benefit from peer supports; (b) providing orientation for students about their roles and responsibilities to each other; (c) providing opportunities for students to work and interact together; (d) offering ongoing support to students so they feel confident and well-prepared in their roles; and (e) monitoring all students' progress to ensure they are reaping the intended academic and social benefits of peer supports (Carter et al., 2009).

Often students without disabilities can effectively and naturally provide some supports to their classmates with disabilities that might usually be provided by adults -- such opportunities should be continuously explored (Carter et al., 2009). It is important to clarify that peer support strategies should be embedded within a larger framework of high quality inclusive practices. They are intended to supplement, not supplant, support appropriately provided by school personnel.

Self-Determination

In the disability community in North America there is a saying, "Nothing about me without me!" Ensuring students with disabilities have a voice in decisions about their own lives is a lifelong process that should start at a young age by giving students the same types of choices as their peers without disabilities and continuing over time by providing them with progressively more sophisticated choices and decisions consistent with their age and cultural context. It starts by sending the simple yet powerful message to our students that they are capable of making decisions, allowing them to have some measure of control and get what they want from life.

Wehmeyer (2007) suggests a series of steps school personnel and families can take to facilitate self-determination. He encourages teams to avoid traditional deficit-based approaches in favor of building on a student's strengths and unique abilities. He reminds us of the importance of empowering students to make decisions. In part this means we must be prepared to honor their decisions and allow them to task risks. We can structure our classrooms to actively teach skills such as problem-solving, decision-making, goal-setting, self-advocacy, and self-regulation that are vital to developing self-determination.

Sometimes self-determination involves interdependence with classmates and also can be advanced with the use of technology (e.g., pre-programmed phone numbers in a cell phone; digital calendar as a memory aid). At the stage that students without disabilities are making decisions about their own schooling (e.g., which type of high school to attend), so too can students with disabilities be more fully engaged in these decisions and also provide valuable input about whether the services being provided to them are helpful and desired or not. Ultimately, the quality of our students' lives during their school years and beyond can be substantially improved through chronologically-age appropriate self-determination.

Conclusion

Inclusive educational experiences are designed to enhance valued life outcomes for students by seeking an individualized balance between both the academic–functional and social–personal aspects of schooling. Implementing inclusive education at the classroom level requires thoughtful attention to at least four interrelated components, including ongoing access to (a) inclusive environments, (b) meaningful curriculum, (c) effective instruction, and (d) necessary supports (Giangreco, 2011). As teams identify appropriate learning outcomes based on assessed needs, we also need to create opportunities for students to surprise us with their yet-to-be-discovered interests, abilities and talents. This helps avoid underestimating students with disabilities – a problem that continues to impede their progress and obscure their potential. Combining high quality curricular, instructional, and support components within inclusive classrooms holds the greatest potential for brighter futures for students with and without disabilities.

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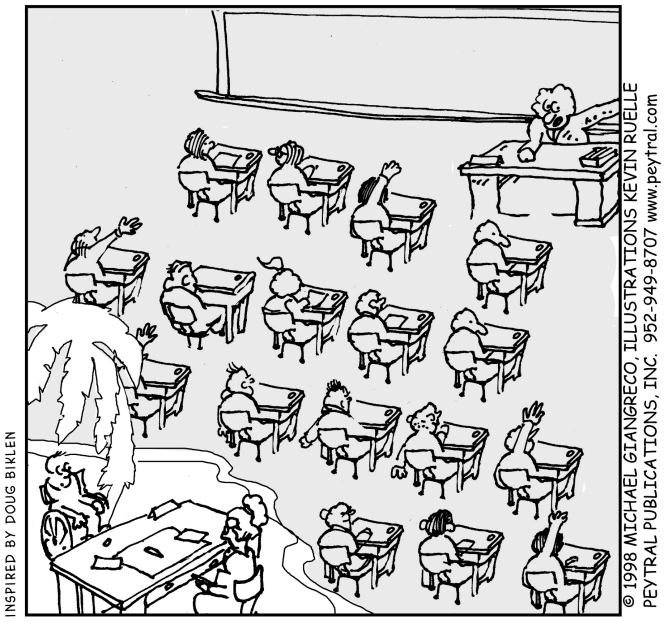
Figure 1



ISLAND IN THE MAINSTREAM

MRS. JONES AND MRS. COOPER ARE STILL TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHY FRED DOESN'T FEEL LIKE PART OF THE CLASS.

Figure 2

JOEY NOTICED A MYSTERIOUS FORCE FIELD AROUND HIS ASSISTANT THAT CHILDREN COULD NOT BREAK THROUGH.