

CEP 840 Final Project

Part 1

Step 1:

I am one of four special education teachers who work for an Intermediate School District. I teach in a 'categorical' self-contained classroom for students who have moderate cognitive impairments (including SXI and AI) and who are between the ages of ten and sixteen. I get students from throughout the county who do not fit appropriately into the educational continuum that their local school district provides. My classroom is located in one of the middle schools of one of our local school districts. I currently have 12 wonderful students who have a wide range of disabilities and abilities. My curriculum is based on life skills, social skills, community based instruction, functional academics, and the extended grade level content expectations. My students do not participate in the general education curriculum and their IEPs state that they are not required to spend any time with their general education peers. They are with me and my para-pros all day besides when we go eat lunch in the lunch room with the sixth grade class.

I am a supporter of inclusion and I am trying to get my students included but I am struggling to implement it in an appropriate manner. My problem of practice is that my students do not spend any time in general education with their general education peers. Vaughn, Bos, and Schumm remind us in the text that the 2004 amendment of IDEA continues to emphasize the importance of educating students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers. I am having trouble actually putting this into practice.

Step 2:

None of my students IEPs require that they spend time in general education with their nondisabled peers. It is important to me because I know the benefits of having them interact socially with their nondisabled peers. A big part of my curriculum is teaching appropriate social skills and I feel like having peer to peer support could be beneficial. I can role play or provide visual supports when teaching social skills but I feel that it could be much more powerful if they were role playing with a nondisabled peer or just picking up these skills naturally.

One of the major issues getting in my way of including my students with their non disabled peers is the subject matter aspects. I am struggling to find a way to do it so that it is appropriate for my students as well as the general education students. My classroom is in the middle school and there are no 'specials' like music that they could participate in. The other classrooms in my building have standards and benchmarks and a strict subject matter that needs to be addressed. It is hard for me to put my students in a 7th grade science class and say that it is appropriate for everyone involved. Many of my students exhibit loud expressive "self-talk" characteristics that could be disruptive to all of the students in the class. They often repeat back movies or T.V. shows that they have heard or seen and it can be very difficult to quiet them down, it is almost like they HAVE to get it out. I do not feel comfortable disrupting the education of the rest of the students if it is not benefiting anyone.

I have tried to have my class participate with a general education gym class and it was very unsafe for my students. Many of my students have limited mobility and require walkers or wheelchairs to get around. We were getting run over and hit with balls while trying to play soccer with the sixth grade class. A couple of my students left and tears and none of them wanted to go back. Is that appropriate or beneficial for my students?

Many of my students have unique learning needs that take individualized instruction to be successful. If I were to put even one of my students in a general education class for small portion of the day I would need to send one of my para-pros with. It's just so hard to make that commitment every day. I have students who are medically fragile and need frequent attention. I have feeding tubes and medications that are dealt with several times throughout the day. On top of all the medical stuff I have various behavior problems that have behavior plans that need to be tracked and filled out throughout the day. I do have the support of my para-pros but they are such an important part of my classroom. It is difficult to commit to one of them being gone for different periods throughout the day. It would be nice if all twelve of my students could participate together in a class. The high level of attention that my classroom requires is definitely a barrier to developing an inclusion plan. I would have to have a classroom that is flexible to when we are there and how often. The main goal of including my students is not academically based, it is for social benefits. I am trying to find a class where they could have some time for social interaction in the classroom setting.

Because my students are not actually students of the middle school where my classroom is I do not get that much support at the school wide level. I am sort of on my own when trying to design an inclusion plan. The school as a whole supports inclusion for their students but my class is just not included in that. The principle supports me when I go to him but it is not really his problem. My direct supervisor, the special education director, thinks that it is a great idea but does not offer much support when trying to implement a plan.

Part 2

Step1:

As described above, my problem of practice is that my students do not spend any time with their nondisabled peers. This problem did not arise because I was told that I needed to have my students more involved with their general education peers. It is not something that I am being told is a problem from my administrators or other staff. This problem arose from me participating in this class. I really started to realize the importance of attempting to include all students, no matter how severe their disabilities, with their nondisabled peers. It does not have to be in a class for academic purposes. It is more for the social benefits and social skills that they could learn and generalize. The content in this class went over most of the disabilities that I have in my class (communication disorders, severely impaired, behavior disorders, etc.) and provided strategies to get them included with their peers. I realized that just because my students are considered to be in the low incidence population does not mean that they cannot benefit from some sort of inclusion. Vaughn, Bos, and Schumm (2007) have provided a continuum of services on page 7 in the text. According to the continuum, my class room is a level four placement. When looking at the continuum, the least restrictive environment is level one and the most restrictive is level six. They are in a full-time special education classroom in a general education school. I know that this is an appropriate setting for my students but I do want to maximize their positive social relationships with their non disabled peers. When they are out in society they will not be in a small bubble with their special education peers and a special education teacher. They need to learn the skills in order to be successful and independent members of society.

I started to get excited about the process of inclusion but I quickly realized that I really need to have a plan in order to make this successful. I also realized that not everyone on the

staff at my school will support the inclusion of my students but I cannot get intimidated by them and their opinions. I needed to connect with other educators in the building that would work with me and my classroom. I know my students potential, they are great people who have a lot to offer the school as well as the community. Having the opportunities to interact with the rest of the school will help them become more confident around their nondisabled peers. I also want to promote responsible inclusion. I do not want it to be a negative experience for anyone involved. In order to help make it a positive experience Vaughn, Bos, and Shumm note that I need to ensure that the “academic and social progress of the students with disabilities is monitored and adjustments are provided if progress is not adequate” (p. 27). I need to keep track of the progress that each student is making. If it is not a successful situation then it needs to be stopped or changes need to be made.

Going through this process is helping me get a plan in place to get my students to interact with their nondisabled peers to the maximum amount as possible while still making sure it is appropriate for everyone involved. In order to help achieve this I need to set some goals to address my problem of practice.

Step 2:

One major goal that I intend to accomplish by addressing my problem of practice is to have my students maximize their social relationships with their nondisabled peers. I want my students to learn specific social skills that I can reinforce throughout the school day and when we are out in the community. I have lessons already developed on social skills that I am already teaching to my students. I do these lessons currently but the setting is myself, my para-pros, and my social worker who are role playing as peers. I have read research and been to conferences that stress the importance and benefits of using peers to role play with rather than adults. By

having that peer to peer support it is easier to generalize when they are out in the community on their own. Not only would it benefit my students but I feel that it would also benefit their nondisabled peers to learn acceptance of people with disabilities.

Another goal that I intend to accomplish by addressing my problem of practice is to promote a sense of acceptance for individuals with disabilities from the general education students. I would like them to learn to accept and understand individual differences in people. I would like to do some activities that promote these concepts with their nondisabled peers. The online content provided numerous different activities that could do just this. One strategy that was discussed that I would like to try is the “Special Friends” program. In this program students meet with their “special friends” 2-4 times a week for 15 minute sessions. This seems like a pretty reasonable amount of time. There are formal and informal strategies that are used to promote social acceptance. Doing these lessons would benefit all of the students involved.

My final goal I intend to accomplish by addressing my problem of practice is to have my students become role models for other students. I want my students to impact other students in a positive way and have them get a chance to feel important and like a role model. A way I thought of to do this is to have my kids get some book buddies with younger students from the elementary. They could meet up with a group of students from the elementary schools that is right next door. We could meet with them occasionally (one day a week or every other week if possible) and establish a buddy system. They could read books to each other or do an art project. I think it could be a positive experience for them to be the ‘older kids’ that the ‘younger kids’ look up to. They are used to having people do things for them; I think that it would be nice for them to do things for other people. They would really have a sense of pride in that.

Part 3

Step 1:

When thinking about a plan of action to address my problem of practice I need to take the goals I set for myself into consideration. I need to think about the people in my building that will be helpful and open to my plan of action. The first goal that I set is to maximize my student's social acceptance and to generalize and build on their social skills.

In order to accomplish this goal there are some steps that I need to take. The first thing that I plan to do is to get into contact with the eighth grade special education teacher. She teaches two hours of resource classes a day that have a mix of 6th, 7th, and 8th graders with different learning disabilities. I have brought up the idea of us teaming together and doing some social skill lessons as a group. She only has 7 students in those classes so it would be a manageable number to come down and do the lessons in my classroom. This would not only benefit my students but it would also benefit the other students from the resource classes. Vaughn, Bos, and Schumm point out in the text that “when compared with their non-learning disabled peers, students with learning disabilities are inconsistent and less effective in displaying appropriate conversational skills, and exhibit difficulties in developing these skills” and are “perceived as having lower social status and social skills” (page 248). This could really all students involved build social skills that are necessary to be successful members of society.

Another step that I could take to maximize my student's social relationships is to set each of them up with a peer buddy. The online content talked about different ways this may look depending on the situation. It would work for me if a student could come down about once a week and gets to know one of my students. The nondisabled student could take one of my students down to the library to check out a book. This could promote my students confidence

but also teach the other student acceptance for others. I think that some of the middle school students would be surprised by how much they could learn from my students.

Another goal that I set was to promote a sense of acceptance for individuals with disabilities from the general education students. I kind of hit on this above but when I talked about forming “peer buddies”. It is important for the students at the middle school to accept others and judge them based on their sex, race, or disability. The first step that I would take in order to this is would be to have a group of nondisabled students come spend an hour in my classroom. I would do an activity that starts out with me introducing what it means to have a disability, and talk about what makes us all different. Then I would have all of the students experience different forms of disabilities. They could have a chance to check out all of the different ‘devices’ that we have to help our students. The kids could take a ride in the different wheel chairs or try walking with one of the different walkers. They could try the different forms of assistive technology that we have to see what it is like. We could also have all of the students experience different forms of disabilities by blind folding them and having them walk around the school so they can experience a visual impairment. They could wear earplugs to know it is like to be hearing impaired. By doing this the kids may learn to accept others. They may not be so prone to stay away from a student with a disability. I also talked about the “Special Friends” strategy above. I could also implement that program with this class of students.

The final goal I set was to have my students become role models for other students. I think that this could be so valuable for my students. They do not really get the chance to be the ones to do things for other people. I mentioned previously that I could pair them up with an elementary classroom to do book buddies. Another step that I could take to reach my goal is to pair up with one of the other ISD classrooms. One of the other teachers has a classroom similar

to mine but for students from about six to nine year old. I could have my students bring over books to read to the younger students. It would be so neat for my students to be the older kids who are reading to the younger kids. Some of my students are not readers so we would have to make some accommodations. In week 14 of the online content there was a section and a video that gave some really neat ideas for assistive technology. One of the ideas that the video provided was the benefits of using BigMacs (or other programmable augmentative speech devices) to have students read stories. So I could program a book into the speech device and then all one of my students would have to do is push a button to read the story to their friend. What a sense of independence and maturity these sorts of activities provide.

Step 2:

The first part of my action plan described teaming up with one of the resource classrooms in the building to work on specific social skills. A way to measure the effectiveness of this activity would be to utilize an assessment called the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS). This is an assessment that my ISD already has and I have completed in on my students in the past. You can complete the assessment in three different ways; parents can fill it out, teachers can fill it out, or the student can fill it out. The SSRS measures positive social behavior and also measures behaviors that can interfere with the development of positive social skills. I would fill out a rating form for each of my students and I would also send one home and have their parents rate them. Based on the results of all of my students I would focus on the top 5-10 social skill deficits and teach them to the group.

When we have completed all of the lessons I would then have myself and the parents fill out another rating form. I could then compare the pre-social skill group rating form and the post-social skill groups rating form and see if there are any changes. I would be able to tell if the

groups were effective. If there were positive growth in their social skills then we could continue and focus on different social skills that they are lacking. If the social skill groups did not seem to make much of a difference then I would know that I need to start over and try something new. This is an easy and manageable way to track their progress and the effectiveness of my action plan.

Another step that I took in my action plan was to have nondisabled students experience different disabilities for a while. A way to assess the effectiveness of this activity would be to have the students complete an anonymous survey before they complete the exercise and after they complete the exercise. The survey could ask questions like “would you be friends with someone in a wheelchair” or “do you think it is okay to laugh at or mock people with speech problems”. We could then get an idea if their thoughts on people with disabilities changed at all from completing the exercise. If experiencing the different disabilities made the students less tolerant of people with disabilities then we would know it is not an activity that we would want to repeat in the future. If having them experience the disabilities made them more accepting then it could be something that we do every year.

References

Vaughn, S., Bos, C., and J. Schumm. 2007. Teaching Students who are Exceptional, Diverse, and at Risk. Pearson. Boston.

Cole, D.A., et al. 1988. Comparison of Two Peer Interaction Programs: Children with and without Severe Disabilities. American Educational Research Journal, *Vol. 25, No. 3*. 415-439.