Including Young Learners with Special Needs in Social Studies Classrooms

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Before No Child Left Behind (2001), young learners (Kindergarten-3) with special needs were often pulled out of social studies and science classrooms for instruction from their special education teacher. Due to scheduling logistics and lower expectations, special needs students did not always receive the benefits of a full education. Inclusion of special needs students in general education classroom is implemented in schools today to rectify such inequalities. The focus of this paper is to offer research-based practices for differentiating instruction in the social studies that could benefit young learners with diverse needs. Some of these include: adapting instruction, adapting assignments, teaching learning skills, varying instructional grouping, and facilitating progress monitoring.

Key words: young learners, special needs, inclusion, social studies, elementary, teacher preparation, professional development, diversity, differentiation, adaptation, inclusion, special education

As a student teacher supervisor some years ago, I (Ruth) remember visiting one of my student teachers for an observation of her teaching in a third grade public school setting. She presented the lesson well. About halfway through the lesson, I noticed four students entered the room. Since I was seated in the back of the classroom, I was able to observe those students closely. The student teacher continued to teach and did not acknowledge the students in any way; so, I was unsure why they came in late. After a few minutes, one student began to draw and the other three put their heads down on their desks and closed their eyes. The lesson continued without interruption and before long, the three students were asleep. When I asked about these students after the lesson ended, the student teacher explained they were returning from their learning disabilities teacher and were not really expected to do social studies. Perplexed by the student teacher’s rationalization, I explained to her that she was obligated to provide meaningful instruction for all students. Utilizing differentiated instruction techniques would have helped this student teacher allow these four students appropriate access to the social studies content in her classroom.

Differentiation, adapting instruction to meet the needs of all learners, involves teaching the same content to diverse learners using different methods. Even when pre-service teachers receive training in differentiation of instruction in their teacher preparation programs, most of them do not see these strategies modeled during internship; therefore, they tend not to use them in their beginning years of teaching (Holloway, 2000). As indicated in Carol Tomlinson’s research (1999), pre-service teachers rarely receive any training in differentiation of instruction. As a result, many teachers do not plan for a wide range of student abilities, especially those at the slow and accelerated ranges of learning. Before No Child Left Behind (2001), teaching to the
median academic level in a classroom, as well as the use of pull-out practices for students with special needs, were common. Today, most students with special needs spend much of their time in general education classrooms even though few general education teachers have been trained in how to design instruction for many diverse needs. The focus of this paper is to identify research-based practices for differentiating instruction for young learners with diverse needs, especially in the social studies, including: adapting instruction, adapting assignments, teaching learning skills, varying instructional grouping, and facilitating progress monitoring.

According to the United States Department of Education (2013), 61% of students with special needs spend approximately 80% of their school day in general education settings. A review of the literature showed that available data does not currently indicate the percentage of those general education settings that include paraprofessional support for students with special needs, or are co-taught classrooms in which a general education teacher and special education teacher partner to educate all students. Data retrieved in 2011, indicate 8.4% of all students in American schools were receiving special education services (United States Department of Education, 2013) and over three million students with special needs were spending the vast majority of their time in general education classrooms. This statistic suggests the importance of general education teachers possessing the knowledge and skills to maximize learning for these students.

Importance of Social Studies Education for Students with Diverse Needs

Even though social studies is a part of the core curriculum, its importance is often overlooked for young learners including those with special needs. These students need to learn their roles and responsibilities as participatory citizens in a democratic society. Knowledge, skills, and dispositions of democratic processes are fundamental components for students’ roles later in life. To deprive special needs students of the development of this important content has serious ramifications for society as a whole and is reiterated by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS):

The social studies in the early childhood/elementary years are crucial if we expect the young people of this nation to become active, responsible citizens for maintaining the democratic values upon which this nation was established. Unless children acquire the foundations of knowledge, attitudes, and skills in social studies in the important elementary years, it is unlikely that teachers in the junior and senior high schools will be successful in preparing effective citizens for the 21st century (NCSS, 1988, Section I, para. 4).

During the early years, there is a window of opportunity for shaping important attitudes and values toward society that may be resistant to change as early as age nine or ten (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 1986). To miss this essential opportunity also deprives young learners of the foundational concepts for learning more complex ideas in subsequent grades that “may make it more difficult for citizens of the 21st century to cope with their future” (NCSS, 1988, Section V, para. 7). Special needs students will become participating citizens in our democratic society and should be given the same opportunities to develop their knowledge, skills, and dispositions as other students. To deprive them of such opportunities is unconstitutional and has been addressed in the No Child Left Behind Act (2001).

Historical Background of Inclusive Practices

The practice of serving students with special needs in general education classrooms is known as inclusion, or inclusive practice, and is clearly rooted in the history of American
education. Beginning in the 1950’s there was a push towards deinstitutionalization of individuals with special needs that was spearheaded by families and advocacy groups. These efforts included a call for students with special needs to receive education services in their local schools. This idea was supported by court decisions in cases such as *PARC v. Pennsylvania* (1972) and *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia* (1972), both of which involved the court stating students with special needs should not be denied the right to a free and appropriate public education (Murdick, Gartin, & Fowler, 2014). These court cases greatly influenced the landmark passage of Public Law 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, in 1975 (This law is now referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA). This law established the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The idea of LRE, thus, cannot be separated from the practice of inclusion, and LRE is the legal foundation for efforts to educate students with special needs in general education classrooms as much as possible (Smith et al., 2006).

The complexity of determining a student’s LRE has not in any way reduced the number of students with special needs being served in general education classes. Numerous studies have found students with disabilities experiencing success in general education settings, although limitations on empirical research have yielded inconclusive findings. Significant, there is research to suggest students with disabilities can succeed academically in a general education setting when given proper supports (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014), even as early as kindergarten (Rafdal et al., 2011). There are also positive academic and social outcomes for nondisabled students being taught in inclusive classrooms (Frederico, Herrold, & Venn, 1999; Salend & Duhaney, 1999). Conversely, both general and special education teachers could benefit from improved collaboration and communication involving effective strategies for their respective classroom environments (Smith et al., 2006).

**Early Intervening Services**

Under IDEA 2004, school districts may use a portion of their federal special education funds (up to 15%) to:

- Develop and implement coordinated, early intervening services … for students in kindergarten through grade 12 (with a particular emphasis on students in kindergarten through grade three) who have not been identified as needing special education or related services but who need additional academic and behavioral support to succeed in a general education environment” (U.S. Department of Education, 2005, emphasis added).

The idea behind this practice is to determine if techniques can address the struggling student’s needs in the general education classroom before a recommendation for potential placement in special education services, often referred to as pre-referral intervention. These techniques may include modifications in curriculum, instructional strategies, and management of the classroom (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000).

Even though there are potential disadvantages associated with inclusion, it is clear the vast majority of students with special needs will be educated in general education classrooms for the majority of their school day. Students with special needs can be successful in these classes. This is true for all academic subjects including social studies. There are successful techniques teachers can incorporate to support students with special needs in their social studies classes in early elementary grades. These techniques include adapting instruction, adapting assignments, teaching learning skills, varying instructional grouping, and facilitating progress monitoring (Scott, Vitale, & Masten, 1998).
Instructional Strategies for Inclusive Social Studies Classrooms

Adapting Instruction

Students with special needs often benefit from the same type of teaching that benefits other students. There is ample evidence, however, indicating students with special needs in inclusive classrooms achieve at a higher level when teachers take steps to accommodate their particular needs. Adapting instruction for students with special needs could involve accommodations, changes in input and output processes in teaching and assessment, and modifications, including changes to content or standards (Polloway, Epstein & Bursuck, 2002). Some examples of evidence-based instructional adaptations include: adjusting the pace of instruction to individual learners (Greenwood, Delquadri, & Hall, 1984), appealing to multiple learning styles via multi-sensory approaches (Gallavan & Kottler, 2012), and providing immediate individual feedback to a specific student with a disability (Hattie & Temperley, 2007).

Visuals provide an illustration of content that is often useful for young learners who have information processing difficulties. One researcher advises using “a lot of cards for…autistic students, to teach sight vocabulary, attributes, safety signs and to evaluate new vocabulary,” (Webster, 2015, para. 2). It is further suggested teachers seek out alternative mediums through which to present content other than print as well as ways students can use non-print methods (i.e., illustrations, models, and technology) to demonstrate their understanding of a particular concept or idea (Webster, 2015). Multisensory opportunities may include, for example, tasting foods from different cultures. Movement is an active strategy that is particularly useful for kinesthetic learners. An example of movement in social studies is to have students use their bodies to form landforms as described in the lesson plan “I Am a Rock, I Am an Island” (Arizona Geographic Alliance, 2015).

Graphic organizers “allow students to organize information” and “give visual representations of facts/concepts” (Gregory & Chapman, 2002, p. 87). The use of graphic organizers for different ability levels is specified:

- The basic ability level students should be provided a word/phrase box to help them.
- Another way you can level is by providing the main content to the basic students and then have them fill in the word. The enriched students should be provided the word and then fill in the content that goes with it which uses more critical thinking. Below is an example of how you can level graphic organizers. The basic version is on the top and the enriched/average version is on the bottom (Mastrodomenico, 2015, para. 17).

Illustrations of graphic organizers designed for basic and enrichment abilities on the same content can be found on the website Social Studies Differentiated Instruction (please refer to Web Based References for the URL.)

The following strategies for students with special needs in social studies are suggested:

1. Activity-oriented instruction
2. Instruction related to students’ everyday experiences
3. Interesting social studies activities
4. Appropriate linguistic and conceptual social studies content demands
5. Efficient classroom management, establishing ground rules and procedures for social studies activities
6. Focus on skills development throughout social studies activities
7. Examination of textbooks for the impact they may have on students (Sunal & Haas, 2008, para. 3)

Specific strategies for adapting instruction in social studies classrooms include active, hands-on lessons that are related to students in personally meaningful ways. Touchable, concrete items that relate to real life (realia) provide multisensory opportunities that help students conceptualize abstract ideas. An example would be to help students understand the painstaking chore of a paleontologist by giving them a chocolate chip cookie, a small paintbrush, a toothpick and a sponge. Have them practice being a paleontologist by trying to extract the rare artifact (chocolate chip) from the side of a mountain (cookie) without breaking it. Lesson plans using realia in simulated archaeology digs are motivating to students; see online resources at Wayne State University and the Archeology Institute of America (please refer to the Web Based References for the URL).

Adapting Assignments

Adapting assignments falls under the modification category of instructional adaptations, and is often necessary in order for students with special needs to experience success with the general education curriculum. Assignments can be adapted in numerous ways. Evidence-based approaches include: breaking academic tasks into smaller steps (Alexander & Judy, 1988), shortening assignments (i.e., Nowacek & Mamlin, 2007), incorporating modeling into instruction (i.e., Ledford & Molery, 2013), and using materials at an instructional level more suited to a child’s ability (Treptow, Burns & McComas, 2007). The choices teachers make when adapting assignments should always be based on the particular needs of the student receiving the support. Often, social studies materials require modification. A summary of the basic concepts of the lesson, for example, may be more beneficial than the textbook. When modifications of materials are provided, teachers should monitor students with special needs to ascertain their effectiveness. Further revisions may be required (Sunal & Haas, 2008).

*PowerPoint* presentations, too, can be modified for differing ability groups:

*The teacher can* create two different ability levels of the *PowerPoint* mini-lesson using the same content. One level should be enriched and the other should be basic. Social studies teachers should go into more details as well as include more critical thinking for the enriched version. The basic version should include the basic information that students are required to know in the most simple form. This will allow time for more repetition and review. If a co-teacher is in the room they can use parallel teaching to present the social studies differentiated instruction *PowerPoint* mini-lesson. It is most helpful if an alternate room is available and the class is able to be split up using both teachers to present the content. If a co-teacher is not available, there are two choices. The social studies teacher can teach the basic level first and allow the students who will be enriched to begin on their work sessions. This will only work if the students were assigned a homework assignment that introduced them to the content the night before. Once the teachers are done presenting the basic version, they can track back to then present the enriched version. Another option is to have the students who are to get the enriched level of the *PowerPoint* mini-lesson go through the *PowerPoint* mini-lesson on their own with either a computer or a tablet (Mastrodomenico, 2015, para. 9).
Teaching Learning Skills

One of the most extensively researched and effective practices for supporting students with special needs is to teach specific learning skills or strategies. Students having special needs benefit when they are explicitly taught study skills, learning skills, and test-taking skills (Reid, Linemann, & Hagaman, 2013). Many students with special needs display deficits in selecting and deploying learning strategies (i.e., Hamlett, Pellegrini, & Conners, 1987; O’Neill & Douglas, 1991), which means these students often benefit a great deal from having these strategies taught and supported in the general education classroom. An appropriate example is teaching students self-monitoring skills (i.e., Harris, Friedlander, & Sadler, 2005; Harris et al., 1994), the practice of self-recording one’s progress towards a particular academic or behavioral goal.
The approach of varying instructional grouping to support students with special needs is tied closely to the concepts of cooperative learning. Cooperative learning centers on group learning activities in which reinforcement and success are based upon the group’s performance rather than the individual student (Smith et al., 2006). A hallmark of cooperative learning is that heterogeneous small groups work together to achieve a group goal, and it is understood that each member of the group must contribute in order for the group to succeed (Slavin, 1987). Teachers have viable options for how to vary instructional groups in their classes. One popular and effective method is Classwide Peer Tutoring (CWPT), which has shown positive effects on reading comprehension and fluency (Greenwood et al., 2001) and mathematics (Mortweet et al., 1999). A second method is Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS), which has been effective in both reading (McLeskley et al., 2010) and mathematics (Slavin & Lake, 2008).

Facilitating Progress Monitoring

There are many permutations of the concept of progress monitoring, but its most important function is as an assessment method to monitor a student’s progress towards standards or benchmarks on a more frequent basis (Hoover, 2013). Students have a vested interest in understanding their own mastery of different skills and concepts, and progress monitoring can provide valuable assessment information to both teacher and learner. Promoting progress monitoring is an approach closely tied to the concept of self-monitoring mentioned above, and focuses on teaching the student to record and understand frequent measures of academic progress. Regular use of formative assessments provides needed information for the teacher for adjusting instruction and for providing students with frequent feedback. A variety of types of assessments should be used frequently to get a true understanding of what students know (Dodge, 2009). The most challenging aspect of assessment for teachers is tracking the outcomes of assessment and using the results to provide corrective action. In 25 Quick Formative Assessments for a Differentiated Classroom Dodge provides a variety of quick formative assessments recommended for young learners in social studies (please refer to Web Based References for the URL). Scaffolding suggestions for diverse learners through tiered activities as well as tracking charts for collection of data are provided. Graphic organizers and assessments are included such as: exit slips, Statement-Opinion-Support Summary (SOS), list-group-label, flipbooks, and 3-2-1.

To view lessons and unit projects that successfully implement all of the above-describe strategies in various content areas and grade levels, visit classrooms@work sponsored by Northwest Educational Technology Consortium (NETC) (please refer to Web Based References for the URL).

Conclusion

Young learners with special needs are due the benefits of a full education, including social studies. The impact of not meeting this goal can affect their abilities to become participatory citizens in our democratic society. Just as students need instruction in learning to read and perform math computations, they also need guidance in effective social studies instruction. Although educational legislation requires that students with special needs be given the benefits of a full education, many teachers continue to struggle with implementation. Diversity in today’s classrooms, as well as the lack of intensive professional development on differentiation techniques, is a challenge that often impedes implementation. Reform in education is a slow process resulting in few good models of differentiation implementation.
It is our desire that the research discussed will inform classroom teachers of the value of including young learners with special needs in social studies instruction. We also hope that the instructional strategies, lesson plans and other resources provided will be the impetus for teachers to try new differentiation techniques in an effort to include young learners with special needs. The window of opportunity to impact students’ values, beliefs and skills is at early ages and is often not regained once lost. Recognizing the importance of social studies instruction for all students is a gift that teachers can give young learners with special needs as well as society as a whole. Teachers are encouraged to share ideas and techniques that they have tried to increase the body of knowledge for those interested in social studies instruction for young learners with special needs.

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