Peer-Collaboration: An Effective Teaching Strategy for Inclusive Classrooms

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With the growing need to make the curriculum accessible to students with special needs, there has been an increase in the inclusion of special education students with learning disabilities in general education classroom. The major challenge that has faced teachers in inclusive classrooms is using instructional strategies that will accommodate the social and academic needs of special education students. This paper describes how peer-collaboration is an effective teaching strategy for students in inclusive classrooms in terms of their social and academic development. In this paper, inclusion refers to a classroom setting in which both general education students and special education students with mild to moderate learning disabilities receive instruction together in the same classroom. Inclusion teachers refer to a general education teacher and a special education teacher working together to service a class comprising both general and special needs students. Peer-collaboration can be an effective teaching strategy in middle school settings.

The inclusion of special education students in general education has been a growing trend in many countries, and research has been towards the implications of inclusion on teaching strategies to make inclusion a positive experience for both general education and special education students. Allport’s (1954) contact theory suggests that there is a positive effect of interaction between groups. Interaction between groups may reduce inter-group prejudice and stereotyping if the contact situation meets four conditions: equal status between the groups in the contact situation, common goals, no competition between groups, and authority’s sanction of the contact (Marom, Cohen & Naon, 2007). As an inclusion teacher, this author has seen collaboration among students as an effective way of facilitating different aspects of learning, including life skills and academic skills, among both special education and general education students. Turner and Dipinto (1997) use the term collaboration to describe peer interactions that support mutual learning. The following is a description of how inclusion teachers can use student collaboration to support mutual learning.

Lesson materials

1. Six different playing cards (see Figure 1) taped on each table (depending on the number of students in each group); one card in front of each student. Use of card numbers will help encourage all students to participate and engage in the learning process as they will be unsure which card the teacher will draw to give the answer. Explicit explanations on how the cards must be used should be given. Students must be aware that tables gain points for keeping their cards clean. This will overcome the problem of students tearing the cards or defacing them so that it would be difficult for the teacher to know which number has been called on. Using card numbers will also eliminate bias in terms of the teacher tending to call on the same students to answer questions.

2. Explicitly written questions that address the objective of the lesson must be provided to all tables. This accommodates students who have auditory processing deficits.

Figure 1. Playing Cards

Method

1. Group students, preferably by mixed abilities and inter-groups, special education and general education students together.
2. Give each group the essential questions that help meet the lesson objective.
3. Explain your expectations: the group works together to answer each question at a time. Each group is responsible for guiding each other on the phrasing of the answer. Students must discuss the answer as a group and make sure each group member is able to repeat the answer because the person to give the answer will be picked randomly using the card.
system. All tables must work on the same question at the same time since tables will be picked on randomly to answer the question. This usually encourages student engagement in the lesson.

4. Give students a set time for them to work on each problem and agree on the answer.

5. Randomly pick on a table to answer the question and then randomly draw a card that will answer the question from that table.

6. The teacher gives class points if all tables adhere to the instructions and gives her/himself points if there is a table that does not adhere to the rules of the game at any one point. This will encourage cooperation among all class members as they do not want the teacher to gain more points than the whole class. The points system can be used for class rewards.

7. After group work students can then be given homework to extend learning. Homework must be differentiated to accommodate students’ learning needs. It has been very effective and productive to give low achieving students homework that stems from work covered in cooperative group learning. Experience in group learning will serve as a point of reference when students do their homework.

Conclusion

After direct teaching and the guided instruction part of the lesson, co-operative group learning can be used as a checking for understanding component of the lesson. However, it can also be used as an exploratory method of learning where students are given essential questions to explore new learning material. This type of cooperative group learning is most effective in mixed group abilities where special education students are grouped with general education students and where there is combination of high achieving and low achieving students. Mixed ability grouping has the advantage of high achievers facilitating learning for low achievers, and at the same time high achievers get the opportunity to self-examine as they explain concepts to low achievers. Peer collaboration is a useful tool in helping students perform at their best (Swenson & Strough, 2008). Another advantage of grouping together special education students with general education students is that students with disabilities learn academic and social skills from general education students while general education students develop the social skills of tolerance and acceptance of others who are different. Peer-collaboration therefore, helps students build within-class reciprocal friendships (Rojas-Drummond, 2009). Teachers as facilitators of peer collaboration, reduce student dependency on adults for knowledge. Reliance on group discussions and exploration of material learned contributes to an understanding of the problem and the ability to solve it independently (Rojas-Drummond, 2009). Another advantage of grouping together special education with general education students is that students’ self-esteem increases as students learn to value and perceive each other positively. Involvement in the learning process from both groups of learners occurs. Another advantage of this grouping is that learners accept positive interdependence and individual responsibility. The disadvantages of peer-collaboration include culture shock for students used to traditional teaching (Poellhuber, Chomienne & Karsenti, 2008) and does not take into consideration the different learning styles of students including individual learning styles. Group rewarding strategy can be challenging in that it is time consuming if it is not well planned and rules thoroughly explained. However, the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages.

References


