

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Centers for Literacy in a Multi-Level Special Education Classroom

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Introduction

Research have indicated that students' with IEP placed in an inclusive setting tends to have increased in test scores, enhance self-esteem and good communication or social skills (Power-de Fur and Orelove, 1997). It is in this perspective that more school district are pushing on placing students with IEPs in the inclusive setting. Given this scenario, the numbers of students in the self-contained setting tend to decrease. This put a special educator in a self-contained classroom to handle multi-level grade levels. This kind of setting now places a special educator in a challenging position on how to teach students with varying grade level, readiness level, abilities, achievements, learning modalities and weaknesses.

Teaching a self-contained classroom with multi-grade levels demands a great deal of planning on the part of the special educator. The needs of the students are complex and thus, "The one size, fits all approach" to teaching does not apply at all. One way to address each of the educational needs of each student in the class, the special educator needs to differentiate instruction through the use of the Literacy Centers. However, Tomlinson (2002) indicated that differentiation of instruction adds up to classroom management and adds up on how to accommodate students with special needs. Thus, making differentiation a lot difficult at first.

Differentiating instruction in Literacy starts with preassessment (Tompkins, 2006 and Heacox, 2009). The special educator may choose to use formal assessments or informal assessments to be able to know, understand and determine the skills that need to be learn in literacy. Since assessment and instruction are interrelated, the data obtained from the assessment can help the special educator in preparing the materials in the centers that will address each skills that need to be reinforce. The data obtained can also be used as a basis for grouping students.

Whole group instruction is used to introduce a new topic to the entire class. However, this kind of instruction makes it difficult to address individual needs of the students (Vaugh, Boss and Schumm, 2006). Therefore, in a multi-grade level class, the special educator needs to instruct in a small group setting or one-on-one as needed. The idea is, while the special educator is working with the "targeted students", and the rest of the students will be working on their assigned literacy stations. The success of using literacy centers lies on the special educators ability to plan and group students based on their need.

Suggestions on How to Make transition in the Different Learning Centers

1. Have a Literacy Rotation Board. Place this board in the class that is accessible for all students. Have a pocket card with the students' names. And then use colored sticks and each color represent a literacy center. For example, the red stand for phonological awareness center; green for phonics center; yellow for fluency center; purple for Vocabulary center and blue for comprehension center. In this way, when teacher inform students to go to their respective center, all they need to do is look at the color of their stick.
2. Have a printed rules and procedures on each center. State the behavioral expectations expected of them like how do they get the materials, how do they use the materials and how to put the materials back.
3. Have a chart in each center which specific materials the student can use for a day. Since each center has several materials, it is important that the teacher will assign materials that the student will be able to do independently. For example, if two students were assigned in the Fluency Center, each students will working based on their ability. One student might be reading preprimer sight words, while the other student might be practicing fluency reading grade level passages.
4. Take time to walk-through the students in each centers. Teach the students how to use the materials in the centers. This takes time but this is one way to make them independent learners in the centers. They should familiarize themselves which materials each student will be able to use and explain why some students may not use the other materials.
Practice...Practice....until students will be able to go to their centers with no prompts from the teacher.
5. Teach students that when they are working in their centers, they may not ask/approach the teacher. Teach the students that the teacher is invisible when teaching a group of students. I wore a Princess Hat, and informed students in the centers that when I am wearing it, they can't come to me to ask questions. Thus, they were told to ask 2 classmates using the whispered voice.
6. Provide one material to address the components of each elements of reading. And as days pass by, include some materials that will support the topic that the special educator is teaching.

Literacy Centers

Phonological Awareness

Research have indicated that children who go to school without phonemic awareness tends to learn to read successful while children who lack phonemic awareness tends to have difficulty in reading (Cunningham) It is in this perspective that the special educator should be able address the needs of students who lacks this skill.

Special Educator should provide materials for the following components of phonemic awareness:

- Rime
 - Rhyme Identification
 - Rhyme production
- Syllables
 - Syllable blending
 - Syllable segmenting
 - Syllable deletion
- Phonemic Awareness
 - Phoneme Identification
 - Phoneme Isolation (initial and final)
 - Phoneme Blending
 - Phoneme Segmentation
 - Phoneme deletion
 - Phoneme Addition
 - Phoneme Substitution

www.fcrr.org provides printable materials to address all the identified components of phonological awareness.

Differentiation: each student can work on a skill that they need to learn based on their preassessment. And then once the student mastered the skill, move up the student to another skill until phonological awareness develops.

Phonics Center

The goal of phonics is to teach students semantic relationships between letters and their sounds. If students were able to represent letters with sounds and then blend them, then the student starts reading. However, reading becomes a problem when students can not represent the letters with their sounds.

The center should have an activity based on the following components of Phonics:

- Capital Letter Names
- Lowercase Letter Names
- Consonant Sounds
- Consonant Digraphs
- Vowel Sounds
- Short Vowel Sounds
- Short Vowel with Consonant Digraphs
- Short Vowel with Consonant Blends
- Vowel + e
- Vowel Diphthongs & Vowel Digraphs
- R- and L- Controlled
- Prefixes
- Suffixes
- Multi-Syllabic Words

Differentiation: Based on their preassessment, students who may need to know their letters and sounds can work on it. While students who needs to learn consonant clusters will work with blends.

www.fcrr.org provides printed center materials to address some the identified components of phonics.

Fluency

Is the ability to be able to read accurate and rapidly. The special educator should provide each students repetition of reading sights words and grade level words.

The center should have materials that will address:

- Sight words (Prek to Grade 3) <http://fishforwords.com/sight-word-lists.php>
- Fluency Phrases <http://www.readingresource.net/support-files/shortfluencyphrases.pdf>
- Grade level Passages (for independent readers)

Differentiation: Students will practice reading fluency based on their level. A preprimer reader will practice pre-primer sight words. A beginning reader may practice fluency using phrases and independent readers may practice passages from grade level text.

Vocabulary

It is important for students to inverse vocabulary usage as it contribute significantly to the reading comprehension

The center should have

- Pictionary
- Dictionary
- Thesaurus
- Word Maps

- Other materials that you will produce as you teach vocabulary such as synonyms, antonyms, context clues, prefix and suffix.

Differentiation: Students who can read and write will use the word map to find the definition of their grade level word. Students may opt to choose the dictionary or other resources in this center. Students who can't read or can't write words, will be allowed to use drawings/symbols/letters to represent their answer to the word map.

Comprehension

Comprehension refers to the student's ability to understand the text she/he is reading.

This center should have

- Graphic organizer/thinking maps
- Brief Constructed Response Questions
- Classroom Library
 - Sight word Reader Books (Red)
 - Beginner Reader Books (Orange)
 - Intermediate Reader Books Green

Differentiation: Color code the books in your library. Based on the students' preassessment, inform students which color book they will read. Students may choose to use graphic organizer / thinking maps that were discussed in class. Or the fluent readers and writers may choose to answer a Brief-Constructed Response Question.

Conclusion

Teaching in a multi-grade level self-contained class can be overwhelming and challenging. Using differentiation in the literacy centers will be able to address the diversity in readiness, interests, leaning modalities and abilities in a multi-grade level classroom. The special educator will conduct an informal or formal assessment to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the students. Data obtained can be used for planning the materials that will be prepared in each literacy center and used for groupings as well. The data obtained can also be used for small-group instruction.

Teaching the students the behavioral expectations and the procedures for using the centers is a must to have a smooth transition in the different literacy centers. The literacy centers are tools that students can engage enthusiastically in learning without direct instruction from the special educator. This also give the special educator the time to pull-out targeted students who may need to learn a particular skill in class.

Teaching in a multi-grade level can be demanding and stressful. But with the use of the literacy centers, teaching in a multi-grade level class is doable.

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