

REFEREED ARTICLE

The Changing Roles of Special Education Teachers in the 21st Century

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Abstract

The introduction of inclusive education in Manitoba, Canada, 30 years ago, has changed the roles and responsibilities of special education teachers. These professionals are now teachers without a class, who co-teach with, and are a support service for, the regular education teacher. They have new administrative duties, due to increased responsibilities related to scheduling and paperwork. In addition, they are held responsible for the teaching of risk reduction behaviours in the inclusive setting. Special educational teachers have therefore had to reevaluate their purpose in the educational system to provide regular classroom teachers and their students with the opportunity to have the most success.

Inclusion of special needs students in the regular classroom is a philosophy that has shaped the educational system in Manitoba, Canada, for the past 30 years. Instead of serving these students by means of pull-out programs, resource rooms, and special education classrooms, we now place “students with disabilities of all ranges and types in general education classrooms with appropriate services and supports provided in that context” (Sailor, 2002, p. 13). The concept sounds simple enough in theory, but it has far-reaching implications for the special education program in a school. With the changes to the educational system, “a student with a disability is no longer only special education’s responsibility: that student is the system’s responsibility” (McLaughlin & Henderson, 2000, p. 57). In order to meet these changes within the context of inclusive education, special education teachers have had to change their roles and responsibilities. They have become teachers without a class, who co-teach with the regular education teacher. Their new role as a support service for the regular classroom teacher imposes new communication demands. They have also taken on administrative duties, due to the increased responsibility of scheduling and paperwork. Finally, they are responsible for ensuring that risk-reduction behaviours are taught in the inclusive setting.

Special education teachers may feel confused and unclear about their role as teachers, with the shift to inclusion. When teachers have classes of their own students, they know what is expected. They set up the rules and have expectations set for their students. When special educators taught in an isolated setting, they taught the students with learning difficulties or disabilities (York-Barr & Kronberg, 2002). They created individualized education plans (IEPs) and implemented them in their own classrooms. There was no need to figure out how the special needs students were going to be included in the classroom; they already were a part of it because it was their classroom.

With the move to inclusive education, the special education teacher is still responsible for those same students, but in the role of supportive co-teacher instead of being the primary teacher (York-Barr & Kronberg, 2002). The teaching of curriculum to special education students, once the sole responsibility of the special education teacher, has become the task of the regular education teacher. Classroom teachers turn to the special education teacher to learn how to provide the best education for these students, including IEPs (Idol, 2006). Therefore, with inclusion, the main focus is no longer just the education of children; it becomes the education of adults. This is a responsibility that has its own set of challenges.

Co-teaching can be a challenge for many people. Most teachers develop a sense of ownership of their classroom. They have it set up the way they like it, with procedures in place that work best for them. The special education teacher may feel like an invited guest in the

regular classroom teacher's classroom and not share the same sense of ownership of the class, which can make sharing the responsibility of teaching awkward for both individuals (Klingner & Vaughn, 2002). It is a case of not wanting to offend anyone or overstep boundaries that have already been firmly entrenched. Most regular education teachers do share the belief that students with learning disabilities, for example, should be educated within the regular education classroom with their peers (Idol, 2006), but the attitudes that special educators are met with many times contradict this notion. Many regular education teachers have a difficult time sharing control of their classrooms, and can have an uncooperative attitude when it comes to the idea of co-teaching (Vlachou, 2006).

With the push toward inclusion, regular classroom teachers have no other choice but to collaborate with their special education counterparts. The special education teacher's role is not to assess the work of the regular classroom teacher. He or she provides support for the regular classroom teacher, so that the best education possible is provided to all the students. The special education teacher helps to make adaptations to lessons for special needs students, so they can have the best chance at success (Klingner & Vaughn, 2002). Taking on the role of co-teacher means that communication between the two parties is one of the most important parts of the job. Communication must be effective if both teachers are going to be able to provide the best educational opportunity to all students.

Communication is one of the biggest factors in ensuring that inclusion will be successful. Special educators may have difficulty finding time to interact with other staff members (Ferguson et al., 2002). Planning is particularly time consuming. If special educators and classroom teachers are to be co-teachers, they need time to plan together, so that they can offer the best lessons to students. They need time to consult one another on individual students' IEP progress (Klingner & Vaughn, 2002). If both teachers are not working together to ensure that IEP goals are being met, then the student becomes lost in the inclusive classroom. When specific adaptations or modifications need to be made, the special education teacher is the best resource available to the regular classroom teacher. The communication needs to happen in the least restrictive way possible, so that the relationship remains positive and intact. Therefore, special education teachers must work around the schedules of a variety of people. This scheduling becomes another responsibility for the special education teacher.

Previous to inclusion, the scheduling of the "pull-out" special educator's time was not much different from that of a regular education teacher. Timetables were designed, and the teachers filled them in to schedule pull-out time to work with specific students (York-Barr & Kronberg, 2002). In an inclusive setting, scheduling becomes much more difficult. For example, if a particular special needs student requires some kind of one-on-one support during a pull-out time, the special education teacher must work around a variety of schedules and issues – is it convenient for all students? will it conflict with the regular classroom schedule? will it conflict with what the regular classroom teacher has planned? will it take the student away from subjects that are important to, or favored by, the student? (Vlachou, 2006). It is no longer just the special education teacher's timetable that needs to be adjusted and worked around, but the timetables of all teachers working with these students. Time is a precious commodity in a school year, so to start requesting more time of others becomes a challenge. The key for this partnership between teachers is flexibility (Kemper Cohen et al, 1994). If both teachers are not flexible with each other's schedules and styles then the partnership will fail, and in the end they will have failed their students. With all of these schedules and students in various classes, moving in many different circles, the issue of tracking their success becomes difficult. It is not only the administrative responsibility of scheduling that presents itself as a challenge; the paperwork involved in tracking the students' success becomes overwhelming.

The special education teacher in an inclusive setting must now deal with an ever-increasing amount of paperwork (Murdock, 2010), which becomes larger based on the need to update IEPs and assess students (Klingner & Vaughn, 2002). The IEP is the most important document used by both the special education teacher and the regular classroom teacher to track the

success of the special needs students. Before inclusion, a special education teacher could write a student's IEP on an annual basis and measure the students' success toward attaining the goals of their IEP in an informal way (Klingner & Vaughn, 2002). In the inclusive classroom, the IEP must be updated on a more regular basis, to coincide with the demands of reporting to parents. It is not uncommon these days to re-evaluate the goals of a student's IEP on a quarterly basis, which means rewriting goals just as frequently (Klingner & Vaughn, 2002). Special educators report spending many hours at home in the evenings and on weekends working on IEP-related paperwork (York-Barr et al., 2005). When teachers have to spend more time completing paperwork, time that was previously available for teaching is sacrificed (Ferguson et al., 2002). Many people decide to become teachers because they have a passion for the children and enjoy watching them have success. This passion is special for special educators because they strive to see success both in academic and social aspects of the student's education.

Logically, special educators know that they are responsible for the academic education of special needs students, but there is a branch of education that is not academic. Education is not all reading and writing, math and science. There is also the whole area of education that deals with behaviours and social skills. Special needs students are more likely to participate in risky behaviours such as alcohol and/or drug abuse, and unsafe sexual behaviours (Lamorey, 2010). Teaching the dangers of these risky behaviours is crucial to ensure the safety and classroom learning of special needs students. Students who come to school under the influence of a narcotic, for example, are at risk academically as well as physically. In secondary schools, guidance counsellors are responsible for teaching these functional skills, but in the younger grades this teaching falls into the hands of the special education teacher in cooperation with the regular classroom teacher. This collaborative approach provides an opportunity for the students to receive the information at the appropriate instructional level, and then apply it both in the regular classroom and in their daily life situations (Lamorey, 2010). If teachers are going to continue to have success with these students in their classroom, they must deal with these risky behaviours and give students the information to make well-informed decisions for a lifetime.

In order for inclusion to be successful for both the child and the school in general, special education teachers become co-teachers who support the regular education teachers and communicate with them on the progress of special needs students. They also complete the administrative duties that come with inclusion, such as scheduling and paperwork. Finally, they ensure that not only academics, but social and at-risk behaviour prevention, are taught to the special needs students. These new roles and responsibilities have arisen because of the shift to inclusive education. It is no wonder that "special educators are more likely to depart the profession of teaching than any other teaching group" (York-Barr et al., 2005, p. 194). The demands placed on these individuals are overwhelming. It is the reward of seeing the special education students thrive in the school environment, with their peers, that makes it all worthwhile. Special education teachers have a special job: preparing the special needs student to thrive in the world outside the classroom. With the collaboration of the regular education teacher, this goal can be met and students can achieve success.

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