"Those Kids Down the Hall" Are Now in My Elementary Classroom: Now What?

Jessica McQueston, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Abstract: McQueston illustrates how peer-mediated strategies were used with the Special Olympics "Young Athletes" program. These modifications allowed teachers to implement this program more readily, thereby promoting the inclusion of students with disabilities. Using pillars of collaborative strategic reading, all group members can contribute to the success of the group, thus disrupting the idea that students with disabilities can receive only help.

_____

Mrs. Martinez, a kindergarten teacher, is told that she will be getting a new student next week. Joe, the new student, has Down Syndrome. Mrs. Martinez prided herself on making sure every student left her class reading and prepared for the ever-growing demands of first grade. Her students work with all different levels and genres of text, word work activities, and hands-on practice. The previous year she had even won an award for being an excellent literacy teacher. Mrs. Martinez sat and wondered if Joe could be a reader. Could he participate in her class?

In elementary classrooms, teachers are working to increase and promote literacy skills for their students. This is happening within increasingly diverse classroom contexts including a push for more inclusive educational settings for students with disabilities. At the same time, teachers face high expectations regarding academic outcomes. This combination can reinforce beliefs about who can and cannot become literate, which is especially true for students with significant disabilities, as less than 25% acquire basic literacy skills (Katims, 2001). Literacy, as a 21st-century skill, moves beyond reading and writing and expands to include such activities as listening comprehension, interacting with others while listening to a text, and even feeling a textured book.

Ableism is the belief that those without a disability are better than those with disabilities (Story, 2007). In the classroom, ableism might be as simple as a preference to not teach "those kids down the hall" or resistance toward collaborating with special educators. As Storey (2007) notes, "Although schools often advocate multiculturalism and acceptance of differences, disability and ableism are overlooked in this advocacy" (p. 56). Ableism also contributes to the belief that such students should not be in the general education literacy class or are incapable of participating in literacy communities. The inclusive school movement necessitates that we better prepare general education teachers to use instructional strategies to support these students in participating in literacy instruction and becoming literate.

I begin by first presenting a framework for thinking about inclusive education within the context of literacy. I then discuss the idea of "differentiation" and how this can be done in a more proactive way through peer-mediated strategies. Finally, I illustrate a model of how peer-mediated strategies can be applied to a literacy curriculum in order to make it more inclusive.

What Is Inclusive Education?

Inclusive education is rooted in the historical movement of including students with disabilities into the classroom as connected to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act's (IDEA) least restrictive environment provision (Artiles, Kozleski, & Waitoller, 2011). Inclusive practices take different shapes in different school settings but share the ultimate goal of including children with disabilities in general education classes to the maximum extent appropriate with necessary supports. While this has been a significant step forward, access to the general education classroom does not necessarily result in social and academic inclusion. Despite the strong energy that propelled the inclusive education movement, growth in elementary schools has been slow. The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA presents congressional findings as a state of the current progress for students with disabilities (Wright & Wright, 2007). Two key injustices were identified: students with disabilities were being segregated from their peers, and they were receiving inadequate

services. Despite these findings, many students continue to receive services in restrictive environments away from their typically developing peers. Inclusive literacy as pedagogy moves beyond the notion of inclusion as simply access to the physical space of general education classrooms. With a broad definition of inclusive education, the *who* moves beyond students with disabilities to include all students that have experienced histories of educational exclusion, and the *what* moves beyond place to focus on participation that results in improved outcomes. This pushes the role of literacy teachers to reconsider inclusion as not only included but *how* they engage in instruction and *who* is benefitting from that instruction.

Proactive Rather Than Reactive

Though using instructional differentiations to support diverse ranges of students is not a new concept, it is vital to ask if differentiation is actually working (Dyson, 2013). Are shared physical classrooms truly inclusive, or do they merely create the illusion of inclusion? Differentiation is more than just changing the curriculum, and of course it looks different in every classroom, but it may include strategies such as fewer numbers of questions, different tasks, or using a completely different curriculum. Unfortunately, many of these decisions are made reactively rather than proactively because of the complexity of life in the classroom.

Proactive Differentiation

In this paper, I illustrate peer-mediated instruction as a promising practice for differentiating the literacy curriculum. Specifically, I recount how peer-mediated strategies were used in a primary classroom to proactively make the Special Olympics "Young Athletes" curriculum accessible to more students. The Young Athletes program "was established by Special Olympics International to provide early developmental opportunities for pre-school children, utilizing guided motor activities" ("Young Athletes," 2015). The program is designed for children ages 2-7 with disabilities to develop fine and gross motor skills to support increased participation and success within the

Special Olympics events. Special Olympics notes clearly that "this program is recommended to be implemented as an inclusive model (children with and without intellectual disabilities together) on a group basis" ("Young Athletes," 2015).

What Are Peer-Mediated Strategies?

One strategy for promoting inclusive education relates to the use of peer models to support educational and social supports in the classroom (Carter & Kennedy, 2006). Peer-mediated strategies have developed into several different delivery models, but it is important to note that it does not always need to involve a student with a disability and a typically developing peer. Furthermore, "peer support interventions have the expressed goal of increasing both access to the general education curriculum and facilitating social interactions in general education settings that might not otherwise occur in these contexts" (Kennedy & ltkonen, 1994, as cited in Carter & Kennedy, 2006, p. 285).

Research supports peer-mediated approaches to improve literacy and academic outcomes for students with and without disabilities. In a study of social interactions among students with and without disabilities, Goldstein, Kaczmarek, Pennington, and Shafer (1992) taught preschool students without disabilities to initiate and increase interaction rates with children with disabilities, as well as to respond to their social behavior using a series of six direct instruction lessons. Findings from the study revealed a high rate of peers using the strategies, and that social interaction rates with children with disabilities were increased with the use of these strategies.

Beyond increasing social interaction, peer-mediated strategies can also increase academic engagement. In a study conducted by Flood, Wilder, Flood, and Masuda (2002), peer attention and praise were used to support three 10-year old students with disabilities who engaged in off-task behavior. Results from the study showed that the intervention was beneficial in increasing on-task behavior and math problem completion among all students. This is a crucial point in that peer-mediated strategies demonstrate the power of peers to positively influence the behavior of other students, resulting in improved academic engagement.

In addition to improvements in social interaction, academic engagement, and compliance, academic benefits can occur from peer tutoring, another form of peer-mediated intervention. Hofstadter-Duke and Daly (2011) referred to peer-mediated interventions as "the use of other students as change agents" (p. 641). In this study, three peer tutors were selected based on exceeding grade level expectations for oral reading fluency to help improve oral reading fluency of students in a first grade classroom. The peer tutors were trained to implement instructional steps, which "included listening to passage preview, repeated readings, and word supply error correction" (p. 643). During some conditions, a reward was given for improved correct words per minute and fewer errors. The results from this study showed an increase of oral reading fluency from the use of the peer tutors.

One main limitation with peer-mediated strategies is a notion of power imbalance. Students with disabilities are often positioned as the less competent peer in these collaborations. The other student, often without a disability, is in the teacher role. This leads to an imbalance of power. Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) can be used to disrupt this imbalance by allowing all students a role in a cooperative learning group.

CSR was designed to meet the needs of a diverse student population and to "provid[e] an instructional practice that enhances comprehension of text and skills to learn from text and provid[e] procedures that facilitate peer-mediated instruction" (Vaughn, Klinger, & Bryant, 2001, p. 67). CSR contains key roles of group members, including a student assigned to preview the text (preview), check for understanding of the content and vocabulary (click and clunk), summarize the main idea (get the gist), and assess self-questioning and overall understanding (wrap-up) (Vaughn & Klingner, 1999). One way that teachers could utilize CSR would be to form small groups of learners of all abilities to complete the steps on the task card. CSR typically involves groups of four students, but this could be flexible as long as each member of the group holds a valued role and is allowed to experience different roles over time. CSR allows all students an opportunity to learn with their peers, and it supports the sociocultural understanding of learning, which occurs through collaborative meaning making and by working with a group so students can construct this meaning together. Inclusion seems to support the academic progress

in both math and reading for students with and without disabilities (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004).

Peer-Mediated Strategies in Action with Elementary Students

Teachers may wonder how peer-mediated strategies can be used with existing curricula in their classroom, with their students, and with the other demands on their plate. I use Young Athletes as an example of how peer-mediated strategies can be used with the youngest readers both with and without disabilities. Teachers who open the Young Athletes activity guide will see one to two sentences for each activity (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Utilizing the concept of group roles from CSR (Vaughn & Klingner, 2001), one student could be the "Task Reader." He or she would still get help from peers and adults as needed, but the responsibility would be to lead the group in reading the task aloud. Another

student could be the "Task Model" who would show the group how to perform the skill through modeling. After providing this model, the other group members would attempt to perform the skill, thus allowing for the development of new skills (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007). In this case, one group member may perform a skill, such as modeling the scarf game, so that the other students could observe it. After viewing the model, the students would imitate it by performing the skill themselves. It is important to note that student groups can be heterogeneous to allow for all members to have a valued role and allow teachers to focus on the assets each group member brings.

Using CSR, each group might also have one student in the role of facilitator to ensure that everyone is completing the activity. This can also apply to preparing the physical space according to the task cards. Another role could be a "Creative Helper" to ensure that each individual is able to complete the task by observing and recommending a variety of accommodation ideas that would allow all students, regardless of ability, to complete the task. Essentially, CSR creates a collaborative group of students that work together, through their important roles, to engage in reading.

Conclusion

By applying peer-mediated strategies to the modification of this curriculum, I hope to enable teachers to promote inclusion and peer-mediated strategies more easily. Utilizing groups and roles, such as those from CSR, peer-mediated strategies move beyond the imbalance of power and allow for all students to be successful. Inclusive settings are not possible without educators believing in inclusion and working collaboratively to ensure their achievement. Inclusion benefits not only students with disabilities but also their typically developing peers.

Research suggests that students with disabilities perform at higher rates when included with their general education peers (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004). While I have applied these strategies to a specific curriculum for students with disabilities, there are further implications regarding how this could be applied on a larger basis and how this would impact staff, students with disabilities, and their peers. Not only can these practices be

applied to the Young Athletes program, but they can also be generalized to other subjects and settings during the school day. By using peer-mediated strategies such as CSR, staff could increase the number of students with disabilities being included with their typically developing peers.

After consulting with a special education teacher, Ms. Martinez decided to adopt CSR and peer-mediated strategies. This not only increased Joe's inclusion and opportunities to learn, but it also had social and academic benefits for the students without disabilities in the class. While Mrs. Martinez saw peer-mediated strategies as a way to become a more inclusive educator, including those students that used to be "down the hall," she also saw that her non-disabled students were shifting their own myths about disability by working together with Joe. As Ms. Martinez learned, peer-mediated strategies may be a starting point to supporting all students in participating more meaningfully in literacy activities.

References

Artiles, A. J., Kozleski, E. B., & Waitoller, F. R. (Eds.). (2011). *Inclusive education: Examining equity on five continents*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.

Carter, E., & Kennedy, C. (2006). Promoting access to the general curriculum using peer support strategies. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, *31*(4), 284-292. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (Accession No. EJ756434)

Cole, C. M., Waldron, N., & Majd, M. (2004). Academic progress of students across inclusive and traditional settings. *Mental Retardation*, *42*(3), 136-144. Retrieved from the CINAHL Plus with Full Text database. (Accession No. 107775881)

Cooper, J. O., Heron, T. E., & Heward, W. L. (2007). *Applied behavior analysis* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Dyson, A. (2013). Inclusion and inclusions: Theories and discourses in inclusive education. In H. Daniels & P. Garner (Eds.), *World yearbook of education 1999: Inclusive education* (pp. 36-51). Routledge.

Flood, W., Wilder, D., Flood, A., & Masuda, A. (2002). Peer-mediated reinforcement plus prompting as treatment for off-task behavior in children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 35*(2), 199-204.

Goldstein, H., Kaczmarek, L., Pennington, R., & Shafer, K. (1992). Peer-mediated intervention: Attending to, commenting on, and acknowledging the behavior of preschoolers with autism. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 25*(2), 289-305. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (Accession No. EJ451585)

Hofstadter-Duke, K. L., & Daly, E. J. (2011). Improving oral reading fluency with a peer-mediated intervention. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 44*(3), 641-646. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (Accession No. EJ941714)

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, Pub. L. No. 108-446, 118 Stat. (Dec. 3, 2004). Retrieved from http://idea.ed.gov/download/statute.html

Katims, D. S. (2001). Literacy assessment of students with mental retardation: An exploratory investigation. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, 36*(4), 363–372. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (Accession No. EJ639174)

Storey, K. (2007). Combating ableism in schools. *Preventing School Failure*, *52*(1), 56-58. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (Accession No. EJ778331)

Vaughn, S., & Klingner, J. K. (1999). Teaching reading comprehension through collaborative strategic reading. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, *34*(5), 284-292. Retrieved from the MasterFILE Premier database. (Accession No. 1818411)

Vaughn, S., Klingner, J. K., & Bryant, D. P. (2001). Collaborative strategic reading as a means to enhance peer-mediated instruction for reading comprehension and content-area learning. *Remedial and Special Education*, *22*(2), 66-74. Retrieved from the MasterFILE Premier database. (Accession No. 4278184)

Young athletes resources. (2015). Retrieved April 7, 2015, from

http://resources.specialolympics.org/Topics/Young_Athletes/Young_Athletes_Toolkit.

aspx