

Putting the *special* in special education *Zigmond challenges teachers to examine practices*

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Good teaching means saying to yourself, 'If he didn't learn it, I didn't teach it well enough yet'

During the 1999 International SIM Trainers' Conference in Lawrence, Kansas, we were very fortunate to hear Dr. Naomi Zigmond of the University of Pittsburgh discuss her concerns about special education, including the way special education is delivered to students. She urged her audience to ensure that "special" takes a central role in designing and delivering services to students with learning disabilities.

Zigmond, a prominent leader in the field of special education and chair of the Department of Instruction and Learning at the University of Pittsburgh, has addressed a wide range of issues in her 30-year career. Center for Research on Learning Director Don Deshler, in introducing Zigmond to the conference audience, praised the breadth of her work and her ability to define the challenges faced in the field.

"What I've always been so impressed with is her capacity to understand problems and to frame those problems in a way that you just say 'Man, that's it!' She can take very complex challenges and make them very clear. She describes what is happening, and then she translates that into what we need to do," he said.

During her keynote address, Zigmond focused on her concern that despite years of research pointing to the most effective ways to teach students with learning disabilities, instruction in many schools

falls short.

"The more we know," Zigmond said, "the harder it seems to be to deliver special education in ways that really make a big difference for kids."

In reflecting on this problem, Zigmond developed a framework to help educators examine their own instructional practices and the requirements of their jobs to determine whether they are doing the best job possible to serve their students. She challenged participants to ask themselves the following five questions to assess whether they are providing the kind of *special* education students need:

1. On balance, am I spending most of my time teaching?
2. When I am teaching, am I teaching well?
3. When I am teaching, am I teaching the right "stuff"?
4. Am I using empirically validated interventions?
5. Can I demonstrate that my students are learning what I have been teaching?

1. On balance, am I spending most of my time teaching?

To answer this question, educators must have an understanding of what constitutes teaching. Zigmond defined teaching as actively helping someone learn something he or she did not know or learn how to do something he or she could not do before. Teaching includes making use of "teachable moments"—

those unplanned opportunities that occur throughout the school day. However, Zigmond said, teaching also must be regularly scheduled, planned for, and done well. These components of teaching can be overshadowed by other demands of working with special needs children, but Zigmond emphasized the first two words of the question: “on balance.” Other aspects of a teacher’s job—watching, cuddling, helping, modeling, observing, troubleshooting, doing clerical work—all have their places and are important. Sometimes, special circumstances make these activities more important than teaching at that moment, Zigmond said. However, if a teacher spends most of his or her time performing non-teaching duties, he or she is not serving the students well.

2. When I am teaching, am I teaching well?

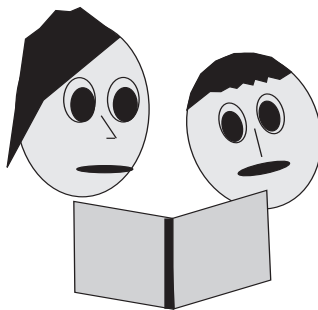
Zigmond addressed this question in two parts:

- What are the characteristics of good instruction?
- In what setting should good instruction take place?

What are the characteristics of good instruction?

Zigmond listed numerous characteristics of good teaching that can be found in the volumes of research literature: modeling, monitoring, giving corrective feedback, modifying instruction based on specific needs. Good instruction is thought through, sequential, planned, systematic, goal-directed, and academically oriented. For students with learning disabilities, Zigmond said, good teaching also includes strategy instruction and

Teaching



Actively helping someone learn something he or she did not know before

encourages students to develop skills that will allow them to be independent learners in the future.

“But they can’t handle it on their own yet, or they wouldn’t need us,” she said.

Good teaching also means taking learning seriously and not taking for granted that because the content has been delivered, the student has absorbed it, Zigmond said. That means teachers must take responsibility for learning and find ways to evaluate whether students are learning.

“Good teaching means saying to yourself, ‘If he didn’t learn it, I didn’t teach it well enough

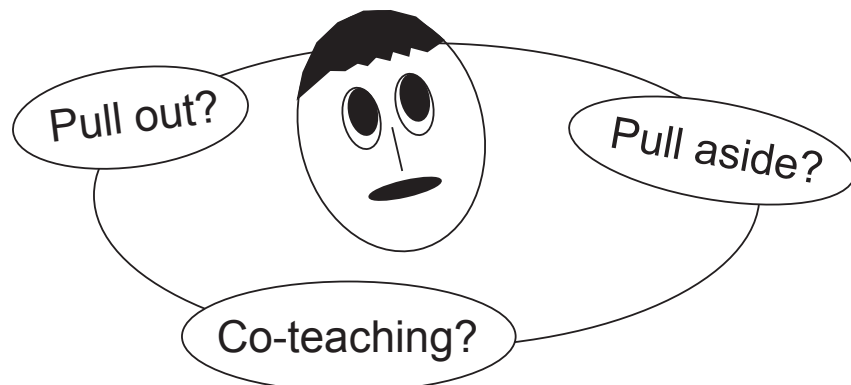
yet, because he can learn this,’” she said. “I think that to be a special teacher means to take this responsibility very seriously. And it’s hard to do.”

In what setting should good instruction take place?

For years, teachers working in the special education field have struggled to identify the best place in which to deliver intensive, sequential, planned, serious, and deliberate instruction: Is a pull-out setting best? A co-taught classroom? A pull-aside setting at the back of a room? Zigmond indicated that the focus of the question distracts attention from the serious issue of providing quality special education services to students. Instead, she said, teachers should ask themselves, “If this is *where* they’re telling me to teach, what do I have to do to teach well in this setting?” If teachers address this question keeping in mind the characteristics of good instruction, they will be better able to teach well no matter where they are asked to do it.

“Good special education is not setting bound,” Zigmond said. “Different settings

Special education settings: Which is best?



provide different instructional opportunities.”

3. When I am teaching, am I teaching the right “stuff”?

With numerous demands vying for the attention and time of special educators today, it may be difficult sometimes to determine what needs to be taught and to assign priorities for learning. Zigmond’s advice is simple: Teach what the student **cannot learn** without you. In practice, the decisions and planning involved in following this advice are more complex. Zigmond divided a teacher’s options into two categories:

1. teach the general education

curriculum

2. teach **more than** the general education curriculum

Teach the general education curriculum

In discussing the popular, yet not always adequate, option of teaching the general education curriculum, Zigmond addressed three configurations for delivering instruction for students with learning disabilities:

- Have the special education teacher teach the general education curriculum
- Have the general education teacher make modifications and accommodations

- Provide coaching/tutoring outside of class

Have the special education teacher teach the general education curriculum

This method of delivering instruction to students with learning disabilities is neither new nor effective, Zigmond said. At least 25 years ago, schools tried having special education teachers teach the big ideas of the general education curriculum, whittled down to manageable size. The results were inadequate.

“The content that was taught by special educators was generally not as deep, as broad,

A very accommodating high school

Dr. Naomi Zigmond of the University of Pittsburgh, one of the keynote speakers at the 1999 International SIM Trainers’ Conference in Lawrence, Kansas, described a high school in which administrators and teachers implemented a number of accommodations in general education classrooms.

- As policy, the school selected textbooks that were very easy to read (written at a 7th grade level for 11th graders, for example).
- The whole school adapted curriculum as teachers discovered that students were more engaged when they made assignments easier.
- Teachers provided extremely explicit instructions.
- Teachers simplified academic tasks. For example, students were given incomplete outlines, which the class completed together.
- Grading policies were very accommodating. Students received one point just for bringing their homework back to school. They received one point if they had completed the homework and another point if they had at least one item correct.
- Students were given many second chances.
- Students could make up for a missed day,

and thus the threat of receiving an “F” after too many absences, by attending an after-school study hall twice.

- Testing procedures were modified to include reading the test aloud and more multiple choice questions.
- Classes were structured so that there was an extreme overlap between instruction and the test. Explicit statements cued students to pay close attention to the material being presented.

All of these are good practices, taken individually, Zigmond said. All are practices recommended by experts in the field. Taken as a whole, however, these accommodations sent the wrong message to students. She said students learned that learning involves shuffling information without thinking about it, school is boring, you always get a second chance, you can get through without hard work, and what matters is getting by, not learning something. Zigmond, who was studying drop-out rates in the school, wondered “Why have the children stayed?”

What’s worse, she said, lots of students still didn’t get it.

as complex, or as well-presented. It lacked seriousness,” she said.

Zigmond said that when special education teachers try to teach the general education curriculum, they are generally less effective in terms of delivering content, organizing classroom time, keeping students engaged, and providing clear and accurate explanations. The shortcomings of this type of instruction should not be construed as a condemnation of special education teachers, she said. Their skills, training, and expertise are quite different from general education teachers, who have had the pedagogical training to handle large group instruction.

Have the general education teacher make modifications and accommodations

An alternative approach, and one that many schools take, is to have a special education teacher work with a general education teacher to make the modifications and accommodations necessary to help students learn in the general education classroom. In her research on this type of instruction, Zigmond has found that accommodations generally are made available to the entire class, simply because that is easier than making accommodations available to individual students. The accommodations made in this setting often are based on what is manageable in the classroom and on what is known to be helpful for many students with learning disabilities rather than on the needs of individual students with learning disabilities in the class. Is that “special”? Zigmond asked. Many

times, the general education teacher sees the benefits of these accommodations in the performance of all students. Even so, Zigmond sees disadvantages to this method of instruction. For one thing, although students may learn what they’re supposed to in this setting, they will always need accommodations because that is how they learn. Furthermore, too many general accommodations may send the wrong message to students. (See “A very accommodating high school” on page 3.)

Provide coaching/tutoring outside of class

Another approach to teaching the general education curriculum involves the special educator providing daily coaching or tutoring outside of class in addition to co-teaching with the general education teacher during class. Zigmond described the benefits of this arrangement in one school in which a daily supervised study hall supplemented the work done in the co-taught general education classroom:

- The special education teachers were better able to help the students with the content of their courses because they had been exposed to the information when they were co-teaching in the classroom.
- The students with learning disabilities performed so well in their general education classes, they actually brought up the class average.

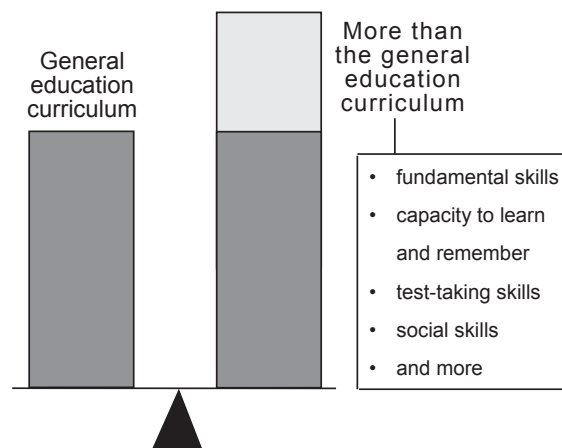
Zigmond credits the students’ success to the structured help outside of class, rather than to the co-teaching during the class.

Teach more than the general education curriculum

Although teaching the right “stuff” well could mean teaching the general education curriculum, Zigmond said, students with learning disabilities need more. Teaching more than the general education curriculum is *special*, she said. Students with learning disabilities need their instructors to teach them a number of skills that usually are not taught in a high school general education curriculum, including skills to help them do the following:

(continued on page 7)

Teaching the right ‘stuff’



Successful co-teaching arrangements require preparation, communication

In a special workshop during the 1999 International SIM Trainers' Conference, Dr. Naomi Zigmond of the University of Pittsburgh addressed one of the hottest topics in special education today: inclusive classrooms.

With more frequency, educators are being urged to deliver services to students with learning disabilities in a general education setting, she said. The idea is that these students are capable of learning as long as adaptations are made to facilitate the learning process. One of the methods used to accomplish this is co-teaching, the focus of Zigmond's workshop. Before this kind of teaching arrangement can be successful, the teachers involved as well as the administration of the school need to come to agreement on a number of issues to avoid potential conflict and failure. Zigmond discussed the five components of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms:

- a shared system of beliefs
- prerequisite skills
- collaboration
- classroom practice
- administrative support

Shared system of beliefs

Before launching a co-taught course, the general education and special education teachers must come to an agreement regarding such matters as the role of the teacher, the role of students, and discipline, Zigmond said. For example, a teacher may believe that his or her role is that of a facilitator,

Co-teaching definition

Co-teaching means a general education teacher and a special education teacher *share* a physical space to actively instruct a blended group of students, usually including students with disabilities. The concept of sharing the physical space is crucial; the special education teacher is not a visitor in another teacher's classroom.

—Dr. Naomi Zigmond
University of Pittsburgh

who arranges the environment so learning is possible. Another teacher may see his or her role as that of a coach, who breaks down information and presents it to students.

“You don't have to give up your own notions about what it means to be a teacher, but you certainly have to share with each other,” Zigmond said. “You have to get a feeling that you each respect what the other is trying to do.”

Other issues teachers must discuss include how self-directed they expect students to be, how they expect students to behave, how to manage the classroom, and how to share decisions.

Prerequisite skills

Zigmond said general education teachers and special education teachers often have different reasons for entering the teaching profession, and their skills may reflect different kinds of preparation for teaching. Many special education teachers, for example, focus on working with special populations beginning early in their college years. They do not learn the general

education curriculum or the skills required for managing a general education classroom. However, they may have many ideas for presenting content effectively. The different approaches to teaching taken by special education and general education teachers should be discussed before co-teaching begins.

Classroom practice

Zigmond devoted much of the session to discussing various ways in which co-teachers can divide their work. The arrangements she described each have associated advantages and disadvantages and can provide a great deal of instructional flexibility as long as the co-teachers are open to choosing the arrangement most likely to meet their needs on a given day. In practice, this means co-teachers may change their methods of co-teaching frequently to meet changing classroom needs.

One teach, one do something else

A very common beginning way

to set up co-teaching classrooms involves only one teacher actually teaching, Zigmond said. In this arrangement, one teacher presents content as the other teacher observes or monitors or drifts around the room providing help as needed.

Station teaching

In this arrangement, the teachers divide students into two or three groups. The general education teacher presents a content lesson to one group; the special education teacher presents something else (such as a strategy) to a second group; and the third group works independently. The groups rotate so each group has the opportunity to work with both teachers and to work independently.

“The advantage is that everybody is teaching what they’re good at, and everyone is teaching a small group,” Zigmond said.

Parallel teaching

In this arrangement, both teachers teach the same content at the same time in different ways. For example, the special education teacher may introduce a story, focusing explicitly on new vocabulary words. At the same time, the general education teacher may introduce the same story to higher-achieving students in a different way. Zigmond said this arrangement again brings the benefits of small group instruction and makes use of the talent and knowledge of both teachers. In addition, groups can change based on needs.

Alternative teaching

In this arrangement, small groups of students learn very

different content. This is useful when a small group of students needs extra, intensive instruction to master content and catch up with the rest of the class. In this scenario, the special education teacher may present a remedial lesson to the small group as the general

‘Your quality time with the kids will be improved if you take the time away to do co-planning.’

education teacher leads the main group of students through enrichment activities outside of the established curriculum. The arrangement allows both groups to come back together eventually and continue on the same curriculum path.

Team teaching

In this arrangement, both teachers teach the entire group of students at the same time.

“It can be just absolutely beautiful to watch,” said Zigmond, who has observed some teachers who almost finish one another’s thoughts in this arrangement.

However, she said, team teaching is less *special* than some of the other forms of co-teaching. Specifically, station, parallel, and alternative teaching arrangements all allow teachers to add special elements to their instruction and tailor instruction to meet special needs. Zigmond cautioned that the styles of co-teaching she described should not be thought of as a hierarchy ultimately leading to team teaching as the

ideal arrangement.

Collaboration

Goals for a Zigmond said, cooperative presenting, cooperative processing, and cooperative problem-solving. Of the four, she cited cooperative planning as the most important to a successful co-teaching arrangement.

“And I say that without any data,” she said. “Your quality time with the kids will be improved if you take the time away to do co-planning.”

In the best scenario, she said, shared planning time is built into the teachers’ schedules. Just sitting down once a week to decide what each person will do vastly improves the co-teaching experience. Unfortunately, administrators seldom build such planning time into schedules and, even when they do, the planning time may be skipped when something “more important” comes up.

In many cases, planning is more accidental: the special education teacher guesses what the general education teacher plans to do based on experience or the two teachers confer quickly as they wait for students to take their seats. With this type of planning, Zigmond said, teams rarely move beyond the “one teach-one do something else” form of co-teaching.

Administrative support

The final component of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms—administrative support—is extremely important to the success of the undertaking, Zigmond said. Co-teachers need commitment from administrators, including joint planning time built into their schedules.

Conclusion

Zigmond concluded the session by reviewing examples of practices in which the co-teaching arrangement does not take advantage of the strengths, knowledge, and skills of both highly trained teachers. Sometimes, she said, co-teaching means the special education teacher “helps,” coaches, monitors, models, runs interference, and pitches in to complete clerical work but does not really

teach. This arrangement can change, she said, but special education teachers must become comfortable with curriculum. This can be difficult, especially for the special education teacher assigned to co-teach several subjects, but doing so is imperative to leverage the skills of both teachers in the co-taught classroom. In addition, special education teachers have to help the general education teacher understand what they can

contribute. The effort will make a difference in the quality of instruction provided to students.

“When it has been done well,” Zigmond said of co-teaching, “it’s taken a lot of planning together, of talking together, of working together, and of really sharing.”

Putting the special in special education

(Continued from page 4)

- Increase their competence in fundamental skills. Teachers may need to teach some things, such as basic reading, writing, spelling, and math, that are no longer taught at the student’s grade level.
- Increase their capacity to learn and remember and increase the possibility that they will perform well on tests. Teachers need to explicitly teach learning strategies, study skills, and test-taking strategies that other students pick up on their own.
- Improve social skills. Students with learning disabilities may need to be taught such things as teacher-pleasing behaviors and behavior control.

In addition to teaching all sorts of strategies and skills that usually are not taught in a general education curriculum, Zigmond stressed the importance of changing the general education teacher’s expectations and mind set.

“If we help kids learn things they haven’t learned before, we have to work hard at helping teachers learn that the kids are

now more capable than they were before,” she said.

4. Am I using empirically validated interventions?

Research-validated interventions are easy to find and important to use because of their proven effectiveness, Zigmond said. Many more practices—such as co-teaching or team teaching and cooperative learning—may be beneficial, but the research evidence is not yet in.

5. Can I demonstrate that my students are learning what I have been teaching?

Teachers must have a good reason to believe that their teaching practices are effective, Zigmond said. Collecting data in the classroom, reflecting on the results, and using the data to improve practices can provide a solid base for that belief. The results of such data collection can help teachers demonstrate to themselves, to students, to parents, to administrators, and to others in the field that their instruction is effective.

Conclusion

To make a difference, Zigmond

said, teachers must

- spend most of their time teaching
- teach well
- teach the right “stuff”
- use empirically validated interventions
- demonstrate that students are learning

“It’s very hard to do all those things in the busy schedule that you have. I understand that,” Zigmond said. “But you *can* and you *have* to do all those things, because it matters.”

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