

The Special Education Resource Room

May Edition 2024

Bridging the Gap between Special Education and General Education

by Rene Rohrer, rrohrrer@ces.org

Bridging the Gap between Special Education and General Education

As an educator in the current classroom, it is important to first recognize and acknowledge the gap between special education and general education. We know that the intent of IDEA and the implementation of IDEA, theory versus practice, may often be on differing ends of a scale. It is no longer feasible to work in isolation if we want to reach all our students and support their learning and growth. We must also recognize our own role in bridging the gap within our sphere of influence and commit to advocacy and to action. We know the practices that support inclusionary ideals across intersectionality of many of the traditionally marginalized populations. As Maya Angelou said, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

ALL students are OUR Students

Regardless of whether the labels are of a positive connotation, self-prescribed, or seemingly innocuous, labels can limit the potential of students or teachers to become the best version of themselves. In our examination of our practices, first and foremost we should reflect on our beliefs and values, our thinking around disability, around expectations, and the language we use in those conversations. When we prescribe labels and categorize, we inherently place each other into us versus them situations. When we think about how we address and communicate with our students, be aware of the labels, the language, the tone, and the values that you are placing upon a student or a situation. Actively reflect on your practices, on your actions, and on your language. Examine how often you use terms that are reductive or ableist or disparaging, even if that is not the intent. Intentionally reflect on the daily interactions in your classroom. How often do you redirect certain students? Is there disparity? How often do you call on girls versus boys to answer questions? Do your expectations vary and is that somehow connected to labels that are inherent in our system, in our society? Do you leave some students alone because of labels and let someone else be their teacher, even when they are in your classroom? As educators we must strive to examine and reflect on our own beliefs and values and on the language and labels that we use on a consistent basis. Our message to our students and to our colleagues should be that all students are OUR students.

Equity versus Equality

The difference between equality and equity is simple to understand when spoken, but difficult to manifest in actions. Equality is everyone gets the same and equity is everyone gets what they need to access opportunity. In the case of education and disability rights, equity is each student getting the services they need to access a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) with the least restrictive environment (LRE) or service. It is helpful to discuss what that means. FAPE is

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a civil right in the United States, and the disability rights movement stems from the civil rights movement, Brown vs. Board of Education, and the plentitude of legal cases and actions before and since where marginalized people have fought for access to that civil right. Most recently, we can refer to the Martinez-Yazzie case, yet another example that we are not where we need to be in providing equity in education.

The United Nations in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) in 1948, claimed access to that public education as a human right, naming it as Article 26. IDEA outlines the responsibilities further by adding that the access to FAPE should be provided within the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) as a continuum of services and to the maximum extent possible with non-disabled peers. When we examine equity versus equality, LRE should be viewed not as a place, but instead a service. What continuum of services are necessary for a student to access the opportunity of FAPE?

Also, within that conversation comes the need to understand disproportionality in Special Education and the levels to which it manifests in our classrooms, even to this day. Disproportionality is the overidentification of students of color in special education. [This article](#) by the National Center for Learning Disabilities provides a great resource for informing yourself about the factors that lead to disproportionality, its affects on students of color, and what you can do about it as an educator. In striving to provide equity in education, it is imperative that we inform ourselves on the conversations of the issues and the solutions. It is also imperative that we continue to examine and reflect on our own biases and our actions to be the best advocate for all students that we can.

Exclusionary versus Inclusionary

Another conversation that necessitates educators to be aware of and to join is that of exclusionary versus inclusionary practices and what that means for students and teachers alike.

Which of the following quotes do you most agree with:

“Students with disabilities should be included with their peers and our systems and curriculum should be designed to work for all learners.”

Or

“Students with disabilities need extra support they can’t get in a general education classroom so they are better off in exclusive special education settings.”

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Studies show that all students benefit from inclusive classrooms. Being able to provide those inclusive classrooms requires that we examine our beliefs, review our existing systems, and remove barriers to learning through reflection and intentional change in our practices.

Read this article by Katie Novak, "[What is Disability in Education?](#)" and watch this great video, *Reimagining Disability and Inclusive Education*, by Jan Wilson.

Practices that Bridge the GAP

We know that there are practices that we can incorporate into our learning communities that will help bridge that gap between special education and general education and help to reduce disproportionality. Those practices are outlined below:

MLSS – A framework for providing high quality instruction and interventions matched to student needs. It is a holistic framework that incorporates evidence-based practices across layers to support students. Please see the [NM PED MLSS Manual](#) for more information.



CLR – Culturally and Linguistically Responsive and Relevant Education understands, responds to incorporates, and celebrates students' cultural references -engaging families/caregivers as equal partners.

Watch this great video by Dr. Sharroky Hollie: ***Why Validate, Affirm, Build, & Bridge?***

PBIS – Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is an evidence-based, tiered framework for supporting *students'* behavioral, academic, social, emotional, and mental health. Please visit the Center on PBIS website for [Getting Started with PBIS](#).

UDL – Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn. Please check out the following resources for more information on UDL.

<https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl>

<https://www.novakeducation.com/>

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Restorative Practices - include ways of creating community that honors the importance of relationships amongst all members in the community; as well as practices to repair relationships when harm has been caused. Please visit the [International Institute for Restorative Practices](#) for more information.

What can you do?

As educators we can participate in four areas of work that can support bringing equity to classrooms and bridging the gap between special and general education. Those four areas or actions include the following:

Continuous Reflection – We can practice continuous self-reflection, examining our beliefs and values and how that manifests in our language and our actions and practice in the classroom. Record your instruction and review for specific and intentional areas of reflection, maybe focusing on redirection or positive praise or opportunities to respond. Share your lessons and evaluation of those lessons with colleagues. Have honest conversations that reflect on how you can continue to grow equity in the classroom.

Collaboration with Colleagues – We can no longer remain in isolation relying solely on our own devices to reach all students. To bridge the gap between special and general education, we must be willing to collaborate openly and with the students at the center of the conversation. Advocate for and participate in common planning time, use that time to discuss the essentials of PBIS or classroom management, interventions across the layers, accommodations and universal design of learning, and culturally relevant instruction. Learn about and advocate for co-teaching models and show up with an open mind.

Commitment to Action & Advocacy – Once you have reflected and collaborated around a student or a situation, commit to and take action. There are so many decisions made during a day in the classroom, and no way that they will all be beyond reproach or the best decision in the moment. Do not let that thwart your willingness to identify and commit to advocacy for a student, to action, or to a practice. We can move forward while keeping the student at the center of the conversation and determining the best route to meet those needs and goals and then committing to the action necessary.