



Special Education as Accommodations or Intensive Instruction: Establishing a Primary Role for Special Educators



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Short Communication

In the United States, federal legislation is the impetus for providing special education services to students with disabilities. In particular, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [1], is a federal law that mostly directs special education services to these students in grades Preschool-12. The IDEA addresses a wide range of issues, including (a) the conduct of evaluations to determine whether a student is eligible to receive special education services, (b) the design and implementation of an individualized education program (IEP) on behalf of each student, (c) post-secondary transitions, and (d) the participation of students with disabilities in annual statewide tests of academic achievement. This last item is especially relevant to the characterization of special education services. Considering these tests pertain to core curriculum academic standards for students' age-designated grade levels, schools have struggled to make decisions regarding how to teach these standards to students with disabilities while also providing special education services that address each student's unique needs, which might include a need to master academic content that is below the previously mentioned core curriculum academic standards.

This struggle has generated a discussion about the proper characterization of special education and, by extension, a special education teacher's primary role. On the one hand, special education has been characterized as accommodations that enable students with disabilities to master grade-level core curriculum academic standards. On the other hand, special education has been characterized as intensive instruction that is provided to address the significant, persistent academic achievement deficits students with disabilities demonstrate despite getting early intervening services before meeting the eligibility criteria for special education services through a comprehensive multi-disciplinary evaluation [2].

Hence, this paper's primary purpose is to explain the basis for the bipolar characterizations of special education, especially as they pertain to the work special educators are being tasked to perform. Secondly, the paper discusses the implications of these characterizations on preservice teacher preparation and subsequent on-the-job performance.

Tiered Intervention Frameworks

At the heart of this discussion are tiered intervention frameworks. Tiered intervention frameworks are organizational schemes designed to match a school's system of interventions to their students' instructional needs [3]. While frameworks have been developed to address students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs [4], for clarity, this paper discusses frameworks concerning students' academic needs. The interventions are categorized according to their structure and purpose, and each category is referred to as a tier. Most often, tiered intervention frameworks are described as a three-tier structure. Graphically, the structure is represented as a triangle with Tier 1 at the base, Tier 2 atop Tier 1, and Tier 3 atop Tier 2.

Tier 1 consists of a collection of effective and efficient instructional strategies presented to all students in general education classrooms to enable them to master grade-level core curriculum academic standards [5]. Tier 2 involves small group, supplemental instruction that targets academic skills students have not mastered after receiving Tier 1 instruction. Data indicates that approximately 20% of a school's students receive this instruction. Finally, Tier 3 is tertiary, intensive instruction presented to students who demonstrate significant, persistent academic achievement deficits despite receiving Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction. Data indicates that 3%-5% of a school's students require this instruction [6].

As students progress through the tiers, their instruction is adapted in an attempt to provide them with more effective instruction that remediates their academic achievement deficits so that they only have to receive Tier 1 instruction. The process of adapting instruction is referred to as intensifying instruction, which involves changes to alterable variables that result in more individualized and effective instruction than was presented prior. Hence, intensifying instruction is a core component of every tiered intervention framework.

Two provisions in the IDEA align with tiered intervention frameworks and intensifying instruction. One is the IDEA's allowance for using one type of a tiered intervention framework, called response to intervention, to identify students with a specific learning disability. The other involves early intervening services [7]. In both instances, the intent is to identify students demonstrating academic achievement deficits and then provide support to remediate the deficits. When this occurs, students return to Tier 1, void of supplemental instruction.

Yet, as noted previously, a small percentage of students manifest significant, persistent academic achievement deficits despite receiving support services. The vast majority of these students (i.e., 80%-90%) will be found eligible to receive special education services, and these services will be considered Tier 3 intensive instruction in a three-tier framework [8].

One might assume that this arrangement automatically results in special education teachers being tasked to provide these Tier 3 services. However, this assumption does not account for the fact that the work special education teachers perform in their school's tiered intervention framework intersects with the work they perform to address students' participation in annual statewide assessments of academic achievement. That is to say, on the one hand, schools must decide how to program for a student who has demonstrated that he needs to receive the most intensive instruction available because he is demonstrating a significant, persistent academic achievement deficit despite receiving Tier 1 and Tier 2 services. On the other hand, schools must decide how to provide a student with grade-level instruction since the student, in accordance with federal and state law, must participate in annual assessments of grade-level core curriculum academic standards. This circumstance has led some to conclude that schools are exercising a binary choice regarding the provision of special education services: either as accommodations or as intensive instruction [2].

Special Education as Accommodations

One approach is to design an IEP that calls for the student to be placed in a general education classroom and provided accommodations that allow access to, and participation in, the general education curriculum. Accommodation involves changes to the conditions surrounding instruction that eliminate unnecessary barriers to a student's academic achievement directly resulting from limitations imposed by a disability.

Accommodations are explained as one of four types, which include presentation accommodations (e.g., instruction presented in writing rather than just verbally), response accommodations (e.g., permitting a student to submit answers orally instead of in writing), setting accommodations (e.g., providing a student with preferential seating in the classroom), and time accommodations (e.g., allowing a student extra time to complete an assignment) [9].

Importantly, accommodation does not result in a change to grade-level academic achievement standards. That is to say, when a student is provided an accommodation, he works with it to master the grade-level academic achievement standard set for every student in the classroom. Moreover, the IDEA calls for students with disabilities to be provided necessary accommodations. As a result, they are integral to school programming that prepares students for their participation in annual statewide tests of academic achievement.

A noteworthy limitation of accommodations is that they do not directly address a student's significant, persistent academic achievement deficit. For example, a 9th-grade student may work to solve quadratic equations in their Algebra class but not be able to perform basic operations involving fractions or negative numbers, nor how to position the mathematics symbol to indicate which value is greater or less than another. Moreover, he does not receive instruction that targets these skills.

Special Education as Intensive Instruction

The other approach concedes that special education services comprise intensive instruction that meets a student's needs in accordance with the design and operation of a school's tiered intervention framework. In the framework, this Tier 3 instruction is an adaptation of the Tier 2 instruction that has not effectively rectified the student's academic achievement deficit [10].

The more individualized Tier 3 instruction aligns with the IDEA's definition of special education as being specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a student with a disability. Specially designed instruction encompasses the content (i.e., academic skills), methodology (i.e., instructional strategies), and delivery of instruction (i.e., instructor, location, and time).

Being mindful that Tier 2 is targeted instruction, meaning it addresses academic skill deficits, and that a student's special education services involve specially designed instruction, the approach to special education as intensive instruction continues the remediation logic central to tiered intervention frameworks. Specifically, through special education, a student receives direct instruction that targets specific academic skills.

Special Education as Both Accommodations and Intensive Instruction

It is important to remain mindful that, per the IDEA, a student's need for accommodations and intensive instruction

must be addressed. However, without paying careful attention to each, a school district and preservice teacher preparation program may focus on only one approach: special education as accommodations. Arguably, there is a three-fold reason for this outcome:

- a. the IDEA's emphasis on educating students with disabilities in a general education classroom,
- b. the law's emphasis on students' access to the general education curriculum, and
- c. the ongoing full inclusion movement.

Another plausible reason is a school's use of a utilitarian perspective about deploying their limited special education resources. For example, a school may employ one special education teacher to oversee the special education programming of 15 students. Based on the direct, intensive instruction needs of five of the students, the teacher could spend her entire day providing this instruction. Alternatively, the teacher could be assigned to provide accommodations throughout the school day to all 15 students while they receive grade-level instruction for core curriculum academic standards in general education classrooms. A school's administration may conclude this to be a more defensible approach because it involves more students and prepares them for their annual academic achievement tests.

The latter approach is not defensible and is, perhaps, illogical in instances where the principles of universal design for learning [11], which are equivalent to accommodations, have been used in Tier 1 at the same time that supplemental Tier 2 instruction has not resolved a student's academic achievement deficit. Hence, the logical approach is to employ special education teachers to present the next iteration of intensive instruction in Tier 3.

Special Education Teachers as Primary Providers of Intensive Instruction

The sensible approach is to train all special educators extensively about intensive instruction and, to a much lesser degree, accommodations. Since general education teachers may be well versed in the principles of UDL, they may only need a little specialized assistance from a special education teacher to implement accommodations. If general education teachers need

more help, a reasonable approach is for schools to train support personnel, especially paraprofessionals, to provide less rigorous accommodations.

Conversely, intensive instruction is a labor-intensive endeavor requiring much thought and innovation. Unsurprisingly, research has revealed that general education teachers want more help with intensive instruction [12]. This supports the position that a special educator's role is to be an intensive instruction specialist first and foremost and, secondarily, one with sufficient knowledge and skills to address accommodations.

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