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TITLE: Changing Disciplinary and Instructional Practices in the Middle School to Address IDEA

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The 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) include a number of provisions that will change public education significantly. In the past, for example, general educators mainly relied on special educators to develop and carry out instruction of students with disabilities (Wilson et al. 1998). With the new legislation, regular educators take part in the development, implementation, and evaluation of that instruction, based on the curriculum of the regular classroom (Gable and Hendrickson In press). Now, both general and special educators are accountable for producing positive student outcomes (e.g., McEllistrem, Roth, and Cox 1998).

Another provision of the 1997 IDEA that represents a significant change is that schools must address the relationship between student behavior and classroom learning. Schools are obligated to address student misconduct that is serious enough to evoke disciplinary action (i.e., suspension or expulsion) (Gable et al. 1998). General and special educators and others share responsibility for providing positive behavioral interventions, strategies, and supports for students who engage in problem behavior, which is seen as behavior that militates against classroom learning for the student or others, represents a physical danger to the student or others, or involves drugs or weapons (Yell and Shiner 1997). School personnel use a team problem-solving process known as functional behavioral assessment (FBA) to draw up intervention plans (Van Acker 1998).

Unfortunately, these efforts to comply with the IDEA are hampered by traditional policies and a lack of preparation on the part of teachers. In the following discussion, we examine some of the obstacles to full implementation of these provisions of the 1997 IDEA. Next, we explore ways that middle schools might overcome these obstacles, primarily by viewing behavior problems in the same way that we view academic problems—as errors in learning that can be ameliorated through quality instruction. Lastly, we discuss the ways in which schools must apply long-term solutions to student learning and behavior problems.

THE CHANGING SCENE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

Today, teacher demographics often differ from student demographics, largely because of changes in the socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and linguistic composition of schools (Hendrickson and Omer 1995; Hodgkinson 1996). Also, a mix of legislative acts and courts decisions has bolstered the doctrine of “least restrictive environment” (LRE) and the regular classroom inclusion of students with disabilities (Gable, Hendrickson, and Smith In press). As a result, a burgeoning number of students with disabilities are taught on a “stay-put” basis in regular classrooms—alongside their nondisabled peers (Gable and Hendrickson In press). Many other students fall between the disability categories and are at high risk because of significant learning or behavior problems, or both. Together, these changes present new challenges and opportunities to redefine the structure and culture of middle schools.

CHANGING DISCIPLINARY AND INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

INSTRUCTING A DIVERSE STUDENT POPULATION

The success of “stay-put” regular classroom instruction of students at-risk and with disabilities hinges on teachers, who must have sufficient knowledge and support to

instruct a heterogeneous group of students (Arllen, Gable, and Hendrickson 1996; Schumm and Vaughn 1995). However, owing to a traditional “two-box” system of teacher preparation—one curriculum for general educators and another for special educators—most general educators have limited knowledge of ways to make curricular or instructional modifications (Baker and Zigmond 1990; Brown et al. 1991; Wilson et al. 1998) or to eliminate “curriculum gaps” found in a mixed-group of students (Arllen, Gable, and Hendrickson 1996; Whinnery, Fuchs, and Fuchs 1991). The standard curriculum is the focus of traditional instruction; teachers feel obligated to teach it and students are held responsible for learning it (Fuchs and Fuchs 1994). Not surprisingly, many students at-risk and with disabilities find the curriculum of the regular classroom to be filled with overwhelming, sometimes impossible demands (Baker and Zigmond 1990).

Fortunately, there are numerous strategies that teachers can use to differentiate instruction. Those strategies relate to organization (e.g., physical arrangement of the classroom, grouping students for instruction); curriculum and instruction (e.g., varying the difficulty level and amount of material, oral versus written responses); and evaluation (e.g., administrative format, student response mode, criterion) (Arllen, Gable, and Hendrickson 1996). Other strategies focus on increasing student capacity to acquire, accumulate, and retrieve the content of instruction (e.g., note-taking skills, work retention skills, mnemonic devices) (Rogan et al. 1995). Still other strategies focus on promoting nonacademic skills (e.g., social skills, problem-solving skills, self-control skills) (Rutherford, Quinn, and Mathur 1996). In addition, teachers are combining many strategies for individualizing academic and nonacademic instruction with instructional arrangements such as cooperative learning (Korinek and Popp 1997).

Research has shown that knowledge of classroom strategies is positively related to a teacher’s sense of competency and willingness to use them with students at-risk and with disabilities (Wilson et al. 1998). In that most general educators have limited knowledge of alternative instructional strategies, they will need specialized instruction in this area. There needs to be more integrated, overlaying preservice preparation, so that there is less disparity between general and special education instruction. At the inservice level, quality instruction on emerging best practices must be coupled with schoolwide technical assistance and faculty support.

MANAGING A DIVERSE STUDENT POPULATION

Current practices of many schools are at odds with the disciplinary provisions of the 1997 IDEA (Gable, Hendrickson, and Smith In press). In the past, when educators addressed a student’s problem behavior, some kind of negative consequences followed for the student (Colvin, Sugai, and Kameenui 1993). Such interventions usually were aimed at eliminating the problem and did not address what the student accomplished by engaging in the behavior (e.g., student disrupts a science class to avoid a difficult academic demand). However, there is mounting acceptance that the use of aversives in the absence of systematic efforts to teach students more appropriate behavior can exacerbate an already difficult situation (Gable et al. 1998). Further reason to spurn traditional practices is that students who lack adequate coping skills often experience feelings of alienation and isolation in schools (Roth and Hendrickson 1991).

The disciplinary provisions of the 1997 IDEA emphasize understanding why the student is motivated to misbehave (Gable et al. 1998; Van Acker 1998). The assumption is that the individual education plan (IEP) team or other teams can use that knowledge to (a) reduce future occurrences of the behavior and (b) promote alternative behavior that serves the same purpose for the student but is more socially acceptable or appropriate (Van Acker 1998). In advocating a positive approach to

discipline, the 1997 IDEA calls for a multistep, prescriptive process. That is, drawing on information gleaned from a functional assessment of the problem, IEP teams and others are able to generate a hypothesis statement (“best guess”) regarding the likely reasons behind the student’s behavior (Gable et al. 1998).

We know that various social and environmental variables influence student behavior (appropriate as well as inappropriate behavior). The purpose of functional behavioral assessment is to identify those variables—antecedent events (e.g., the teacher asks Charles to answer a question) that bring on the occasion (e.g., Charles makes a vulgar comment) and subsequent events (e.g., the teacher asks another student) that likely maintain the behavior. In this example, the teacher is less likely to call on Charles again; therefore, Charles has succeeded in ridding himself of an aversive interaction. With knowledge of the function that the behavior serves, either the teacher or the IEP team can devise strategies that allow the student to experience desired consequences (e.g., substituting one academic task for another) without resorting to disruptive acts.

A common misconception is that teachers must rely on complex and intrusive procedures to deal with student misconduct (Colvin, Sugai, and Patching 1993). In fact, the majority of students will respond positively to standard classroom management strategies (e.g., group contingencies, teacher proximity, clear expectations, and teacher praise) (Gable et al. 1998).

CONFLICTING POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS

Pressure to improve academic performance has led some schools to adopt policies that represent obstacles to implementing the 1997 IDEA (Gable, Hendrickson, and Smith In press). For instance, many schools advocate a broad “zero-tolerance” policy and the use of standard practices to deal with students who engage in disruptive behavior (e.g., suspension or expulsion) (Hendrickson et al. In press). However, those practices provide neither positive support for students with challenging behavior nor long-term resolution of the behavior (e.g., Gable, Hendrickson, and Smith In press). School officials, administrators, faculty, and staff must give equal attention to student safety and to programs of instruction that address both academic and nonacademic skill development (e.g., conflict resolution, peer negotiation).

Until recently, schools have shown little inclination to address student misconduct by means of adjustments in curriculum or instruction (e.g., Wilson et al. 1998). Because low academic achievement and social and conduct problems go hand-in-hand (e.g., Kauffman 1997), however, it is essential that teachers are familiar with specific strategies for making curricular accommodations and modifications (Arllen, Gable, and Hendrickson 1996). Both preservice preparation and inservice training should emphasize that errors in learning and behavior can be addressed through a variety of “precorrective” interventions, such as the teacher’s having clear rules and expectations (see Colvin, Sugai, and Patching 1993).

WAYS TO CHANGE DISCIPLINARY AND INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

As we have noted, middle school personnel are being asked to assume new roles and responsibilities to deal with an increasingly diverse student population. Given our long-standing “two-box” system of public education, schools must work to garner support for changes in public policy. It is doubtful that more efficacious practices will become routine without significant, fundamental changes in our approach to discipline and instruction (Hendrickson et al. In press). A change in perspective might result from a greater sense of shared student ownership of and responsibility for learning. On a long-term basis, if schools are to meet the social, academic, and behavioral needs of all students, they must proceed from several fundamental assumptions (Hendrickson et al. In press)—that is, that all students learn best when

* a school has a unified, positive approach to disciplinary practices, with emphasis on early intervention so that minor difficulties are resolved before they escalate and become major problems;

* schoolwide and classroom academic and behavioral supports are routinely provided;

* discipline is addressed through instruction, with appropriate behavior taught in a routine and systematic manner;

* faculty assume a collaborative role to address the teaching/learning process; and

* administrative leadership fosters a school, home, and community partnership for promoting positive school outcomes for all students.

To address the disciplinary and instructional provisions of the 1997 IDEA, schools must employ organizational frameworks that offer a range of positive academic and behavioral supports (Sugai 1998). In addition, general and special educators must possess knowledge of both curricular accommodations and modifications and positive behavioral interventions and supports.

One way to achieve both goals is for school divisions to establish professional development programs in cooperation with local colleges or universities (Gable et al. 1993). Schools can combine inservice instruction on implementing the 1997 IDEA with building-level and classroom experiences that translate into course credits (Hendrickson et al. In press). And given the rapidity with which teachers' responsibilities change, teachers may need to participate in instruction on a routine basis (e.g., once or twice a year). Further, education officials must provide school personnel with technical assistance and support to carry out the mandates of the 1997 IDEA (Gable et al. 1998). In the long run, as we have suggested, these changes necessitate dismantling not only our dual system of student education, but also our dual system of teacher preparation.

ADDED MATERIAL

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