Transforming Inclusion for Students with Developmental Disabilities through Self Regulated Learning

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Introduction

Canadians have a reputation for finding strength in and embracing diversity. This value, however, is not reflected in educational settings that still separate students by cognitive ability (Downing, 2008; Willis, 2007). When considering students with developmental disabilities, especially as they move into secondary schools, it is not likely that they will be included in content areas classes with peers (e.g. science, social studies, etc.). Instead these students are typically taught in separate settings without access to content area specialists or conceptually-rich curricula (Wilson, 2006). When and if students with developmental disabilities are included, content area placements are rarely seen as creating learning opportunities with potential to benefit all students.

Theoretical Framework

Students with developmental disabilities are still not typically being included into content area classrooms (Downing, 2008; Katz & Miranda, 2002). In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities and Education Act (IDEA) requires that curriculum be made accessible to students through alternate materials and assessments (Courtade & Browder, 2011), but this curriculum and instruction is typically aimed at teaching students with developmental disabilities in segregated settings (Hitchcock et al., 2002). Additionally, special education teachers are routinely absent from curriculum reform conversations and research (Pugach & Warger, 2001). As a result, programs offered special education settings often do not embody recent theory and research related to curriculum and pedagogy such as self-regulated learning, 21st century learning, universal design for learning, differentiation, and backwards design (Butler & Schnellert, 2015; Dumont, Istance & Benavides, 2010; Rose & Meyer, 2002; Tomlinson, 2014; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Districts, schools and teachers report another barrier, stating that it is often unfeasible, given overstretched resources, to focus curriculum development and differentiation efforts on student with developmental disabilities. As a result, these students are often segregated, receiving instruction, content and resources rarely congruent with grade appropriate curriculum.

There are also problematic assumptions preventing students with developmental disabilities from learning curricula with their peers. Katmis (2000) identifies one problematic assumption related to SWDD as “the conviction that these students are incapable of anything greater than a functional existence [which may perpetuate] the preeminence of functional approaches in our schools” (p. 145). Thomas and Loxley (2007) fear that inclusion has become contaminated, reflecting containers of integration, instead of interwoven, diverse communities of ability and access.

As a result, when and if students with developmental disabilities are included in content area classrooms, they are often not engaged in learning along peers in ways that might foster one another’s learning. Instead, goals for students with developmental disabilities are often restricted to fostering social outcomes and functional work habits such as arriving to class on time and handing back classmates’ marked papers.

Content area teachers have also struggled to accommodate wide ranging diversity in classrooms, because many lack the specialized knowledge and skills needed to address students requiring additional support (Buell et al., 2010; Pugach & Warger, 2001). Current one-size-fits-all planning and instruction result in “a hit or miss approach to modifying already existing materials” for diverse learners (Pugach & Warger, 2001, p. 66). While special education teachers have specialized knowledge and skills related to aspects of SWDD learning, they often lack pedagogical content knowledge related to content area curricula. This study offers a potential solution by considering how content area and special education teachers can work collaboratively to plan instruction that, from the onset, addresses all learners’ needs (Rose & Meyer, 2002; Schnellert et al. 2008, Villa & Thousand, 2005).

Research Questions

The following research questions will be explored:

1. How can content area and special education teachers collaborate to include students with developmental disabilities as contributing members of their content area learning community?

2. What is the nature of practices that content area and special education teachers construct together to span and address the cognitive diversity of students in their classrooms?

3. How do the knowledge, attitudes and skills of content area and special education teachers shift when educators collaboratively address the diversity of students in their classrooms? And

4. What is the role of self- and co-regulated learning in supporting students to achieve their learning goals in these inclusive classes?

Methodology

This study will use a multiple case study design (Butler, 2006, Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014) to investigate links between teachers’ collaborative activities, curriculum development, practices enacted, teachers’ attitudes, and the meaningful inclusion of SWDD in inclusive classrooms.

Research Design

This research will include special education and content area teacher teams engaged in ongoing inquiry-oriented professional development focused on including students with developmental disabilities in content area classrooms. Participants will be 6 content area teachers and their collaborative special education partners who each teach at least one student with a developmental disability in a secondary content area (i.e. Science). Data including educators’ and students’ pre/post interviews and artifacts (e.g., plans, activities, photos, student work), and participants’ reflections will be analyzed to investigate links between teachers’ collaborative activities, curriculum development, practices enacted, teachers’ attitudes, and the meaningful inclusion of students with developmental disabilities in inclusive classrooms.