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## **Integrating Support Personnel in the Inclusive Classroom**

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ALTHOUGH CLASSROOM TEACHERS have a range of curricular and instructional skills, educating some students in inclusive classrooms requires contributions from professionals representing a variety of disciplines. The need for the services of support personnel in inclusive classrooms is not a negative reflection on the adequacy of classroom teachers. Instead, it reminds us that no single individual, no matter what her



**What Is Support?**

support... 1. to carry or bear the weight of; keep from falling, slipping, or sinking; hold up or to give courage or bear (a specified weight, strain, pressure, etc.) 2. to give courage, faith, or confidence to; help or comfort 3. to give approval to or be in favor of; subscribe to; uphold 4. to maintain or provide for (a person or institution, etc.)



keyboard), financial resources (e.g., funds for community experiences), informational resources (e.g., professional literature), or human resources (e.g., instructional assistant, peer tutor). However, resources alone do not ensure quality of support. More money or people do not necessarily meet the support needs of an inclusive classroom. Likewise, a paucity of resources does not necessarily preclude the availability of needed support for a classroom. For example, in some resource-scarce schools, teams are forced to find creative and often more positive and interdependent ways to address challenges. Some of the best examples of inclusion-oriented classes are in economically disadvantaged, rural areas.

***Moral Support*** Moral support refers to person-to-person interactions that validate the worth of people as individuals and as knowledgeable colleagues. It includes active listening characterized by nonjudgmental acceptance of ideas and feelings. The person providing moral support does not always agree with the speaker, but adequate trust exists so that perspectives can be shared without fear of putdowns, criticism, or breaches in confidentiality.

***Technical Support*** Technical support refers to offering concrete strategies, methods, approaches, or ideas. Providing a teacher with a journal article on instructional methods is a form of resource support (informational), not technical support. Technical support can be provided through inservice training, staff development activities, on-site collaborative consultation, peer coaching, or other methods. It provides the recipient with skills that can then be implemented, adjusted, and reimplemented in a cyclical fashion to meet student needs. Technical assistance is a dynamic process that is individualized and requires interpersonal interactions.

***Evaluation Support*** Evaluation support refers to assistance in collecting information that allows support to be monitored and adjusted. It also refers to assistance in determining the impact of support on students, families, and professionals. The scope of evaluation should extend beyond acquisition of specific targeted skills by students to include outcomes of educational experiences on the lifestyle or quality of life of the students and their families (Horner, 1991; Meyer & Janney, 1989; Schalock, 1990).

### **Who Decides the Type of Support?**

Collaboration is required to identify and agree on the type of support needed. The intended recipients of support know their situations best and therefore have a primary role in identifying supports. This means that support personnel are not "in charge" of making support decisions. Decisions about the type of support needed in any particular

situation belong to everyone involved. Furthermore, all members of the team have the capacity to provide and receive support. This seemingly benign concept may be a challenge to actualize since many professionals are socialized and accustomed to retaining authority over decisions related to their discipline (Giangreco, 1990a). At the same time, the knowledge and broad-based experience of many support personnel provide them with perspectives that may assist consumers in making decisions about support needs. Additionally, support personnel may be knowledgeable about whether they can provide the kind of support being requested or whether others could offer that support more effectively. Recently developed strategies such as the Vermont Interdependent Services Team Approach (VISTA) are designed to assist teams in reaching consensus regarding support needs (Giangreco, 1990c).

**Who Decides How Much Support?**

Sometimes well-intentioned recommendations to provide support services on behalf of a student or teacher can backfire. More is not necessarily better. In fact, providing more services than necessary can have negative ramifications, such as: 1) decreasing the time available for the student's interaction and

class members can also have an impact on the type and degree of support needed. In addition, environmental influences including school, home, and community factors can have a dramatic effect on the success of students and teachers in inclusive classrooms and schools.

In a recent book, *The Challenge of Complex School Problems*, Norby, Thurlow, Christenson, and Ysseldyke (1990) present a model of interaction among community, home, school, and student factors that affect student performance in school. Twenty-two case studies dramatically illustrate the complex interaction of variables affecting school performance. Too often, educational team members focus exclusively on challenges related to a child's disability (e.g., physical difficulty, mental retardation) without sufficient knowledge of contributing external factors (e.g., nutrition, expectations at home, peer pressure), or they attribute student challenges to presumed disabilities when, in fact, challenges may be the result of school, home, or community variables external to the child.

The support model that has developed in education is designed to match certain disciplines to specific student or teacher challenges. For example, a student who exhibits difficulty or a teacher who is unsure of how to facilitate skills among some class members, such as getting from place to place in the school or manipulating books and other educational materials, can be assisted by professionals trained in physical therapy, occupational therapy, or adapted physical education. If classroom challenges involve how to communicate, a speech and language therapist or an educator with experience in augmentative and alternative communication might be of assistance. Some students have diverse health care needs that require support for eating, physical activity, and other routines and activities that are part of the school day. School nurses can assist in developing ways to address these special health care needs. Finally, it should be stressed that support personnel need to focus more now than in the past on environmental adjustments and improvements (e.g., better cues and assistance in getting from place to place; more accommodating communication environments, such as learning symbols on a communication board) rather than just focusing on what a particular student can do to better fit into the existing environment.

After everyone involved agrees on which educational supports are needed to modify the environment or accommodate an individual student or teacher, appropriate support personnel can be identified. As shown in Table 2, there are several disciplines that could provide support for any particular type of situation. In addition to professionals, the direct experiences of family members and classmates make them invaluable as support for meeting various challenges. In

**Table 2.** Support personnel to assist in meeting specific student challenges

Student challenge	Potential support personnel
<b>Cognitive/learning processes</b>	
Curricular/instructional adaptations or alternatives	Educator, speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist, psychologist, vision or hearing specialist, classmate, support facilitator
Organizing assignments, schedules	Educator, occupational therapist, speech-language pathologist, support facilitator
<b>Communication/interactions</b>	
Nonverbal communication	Speech-language pathologist, teacher, family members
Socialization with classmates	Speech-language pathologist, teacher, psychologist, classmates
Behaving in adaptive ways	Educator, psychologist, speech-language pathologist, classmates
<b>Physical/motor</b>	
Functional use of hands	Occupational therapist, physical therapist, family member, classmates
Mobility and transitions	Physical therapist, occupational therapist, orientation and mobility specialist, educator, family member, classmates
Posture (body alignment)	Physical therapist, occupational therapist
Fitness and physical activity	Physical therapist, physical educator, nurse
<b>Sensory</b>	
Vision	Vision specialist, occupational therapist, orientation and mobility specialist
Hearing	Audiologist, hearing specialist, Speech-language pathologist
<b>Health</b>	
Eating difficulty	Occupational therapist, speech-language pathologist, physical therapist, nurse, educator
Medications	Nurse
Other health needs	Nurse
<b>Current and future living</b>	
Career and vocational pursuits	Vocational educator, counselor, educator
Leisure pursuits	Educator, occupational therapist, community recreation personnel
Support from home and community	Social worker, counselor, educator



deciding who can be supportive of specific student challenges, the range of school, home, and community supports should be considered. Final decisions about support personnel and the type and amount of support needed are reached by team consensus. Consensus decision making reduces the risks of overlap, gaps, and contradictions in service provision (Giangreco, 1990c; Giangreco, Dennis, & Edelman, in press).

### **DISCIPLINE MYTHS**

There are a sufficient number of myths that exist about the roles and responsibilities of the various disciplines. The authors present these discipline myths here as they frequently represent a source of team conflict, sometimes without those people involved recognizing their influence.

First, it is a myth that a person's expertise is the primary prerequisite for carrying out the role of a support person. Of equal importance to an individual's disciplinary expertise is his or her ability to work collaboratively. This includes: 1) letting go of strong disciplinary beliefs whenm /1

to support a particular student, the persons involved (including the families)

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model. The specific strategies will vary given the array of demographic, student, district, and scheduling variables. Perhaps the only two guidelines to follow are: 1) allow adequate flexibility for meeting the differing needs of those individuals requiring assistance and for changing needs over time, and 2) be certain that scheduling is communicated among everyone involved to maximize preparation and efficiency. Typically, a block scheduling model results in less frequent direct service provision to students, but provides the flexibility needed to ensure educational relevance. (See Rainforth, York, & Macdonald, 1992, for more detailed information about scheduling support personnel in inclusive classrooms.

### **Scheduling Time To Collaborate**

Collaboration opportunities occur informally during block scheduling times as well as during regularly scheduled team meeting times, special purpose meetings (e.g., JEP meetings), and staff development and/or training meetings. When support personnel working with other involved persons (e.g., teachers, family members, students) are just starting to design and implement individualized education programs (IEPs) in inclusive classrooms, more collaboration time is required. As those involved learn to collaborate more efficiently and as the program of support is worked out, less time is needed for collaboration. Initially, the authors suggest scheduling regular meeting times

Classroom and meeting times both provide a forum for all types of support (e.g., resource, moral, technical, evaluation). In an effort to be efficient, teams may focus all their attention on resource, technical, and evaluation support and forget what can be the most important and easiest support to provide – moral support. Although moral support can be

personnel with ascribed professional discipline labels, schools are increasingly drawing upon educators, parents and families, students, community members, and others to provide support within the inclusive school community. Members of collaborative educational teams provide support to one another. Those traditionally considered recipients of support (e.g., classroom teachers, students, family members) are assuming more active and collaborative roles in planning, problem solving, and implementation (Giangreco, 1990b; Giangreco, Cloninger, & Iverson, 1990; Vandercook, York, & Forest, 1989).

Several summary guidelines are offered to assist educational teams in making decisions about the support personnel needed and the nature of that support. First, priority educational needs and other learning outcomes are identified through consensus decision making by a group consisting of students, family members, the classroom teacher, and others identified as essential in this process. Second, goals and objectives related to accomplishing the priority needs are determined. Third, support personnel who have the knowledge and

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