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Volume 3 | Issue 3

Article 10

3-1-2000

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Recommended Citation

Gould, A., & Vaughn, S. (2000). Planning for the Inclusive Classroom: Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 3 (3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0303102013>

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PLANNING FOR THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM: MEETING THE NEEDS OF DIVERSE LEARNERS

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Students with a wide range of academic abilities and behavioral needs are represented in general education classrooms. This article provides practical suggestions for individualizing instruction within a large class to meet the needs of diverse learners. The article describes the Planning Pyramid, a format for planning multilevel lessons; provides special considerations for students with behavior problems; and offers suggestions to support teachers through the use of effective staff development programs.

By the time Steven was three, his parents knew he would need a teacher who would allow him to move around and who would know how to adjust to his learning needs. At seven, Steven was diagnosed as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). By third grade, he was on grade level in all academic areas, but Steven rarely followed along with the class during instruction or completed assignments. His teacher sent frequent notes home regarding Steven's misbehavior, and by the end of the year Steven was feigning illness daily to avoid going to school. His mother is very concerned that his fourth-grade year be much better than the previous one.

Tanya is a well-behaved, bright child who enjoys reading and arts and crafts. She enjoyed school in first grade and was well liked by her peers. In the beginning of third grade, Tanya's teacher noticed she was having difficulty solving word problems in math. By the end of the year, Tanya had developed a pattern of not participating in class and often looked on to other students' papers instead of working on her own. Her parents were frustrated

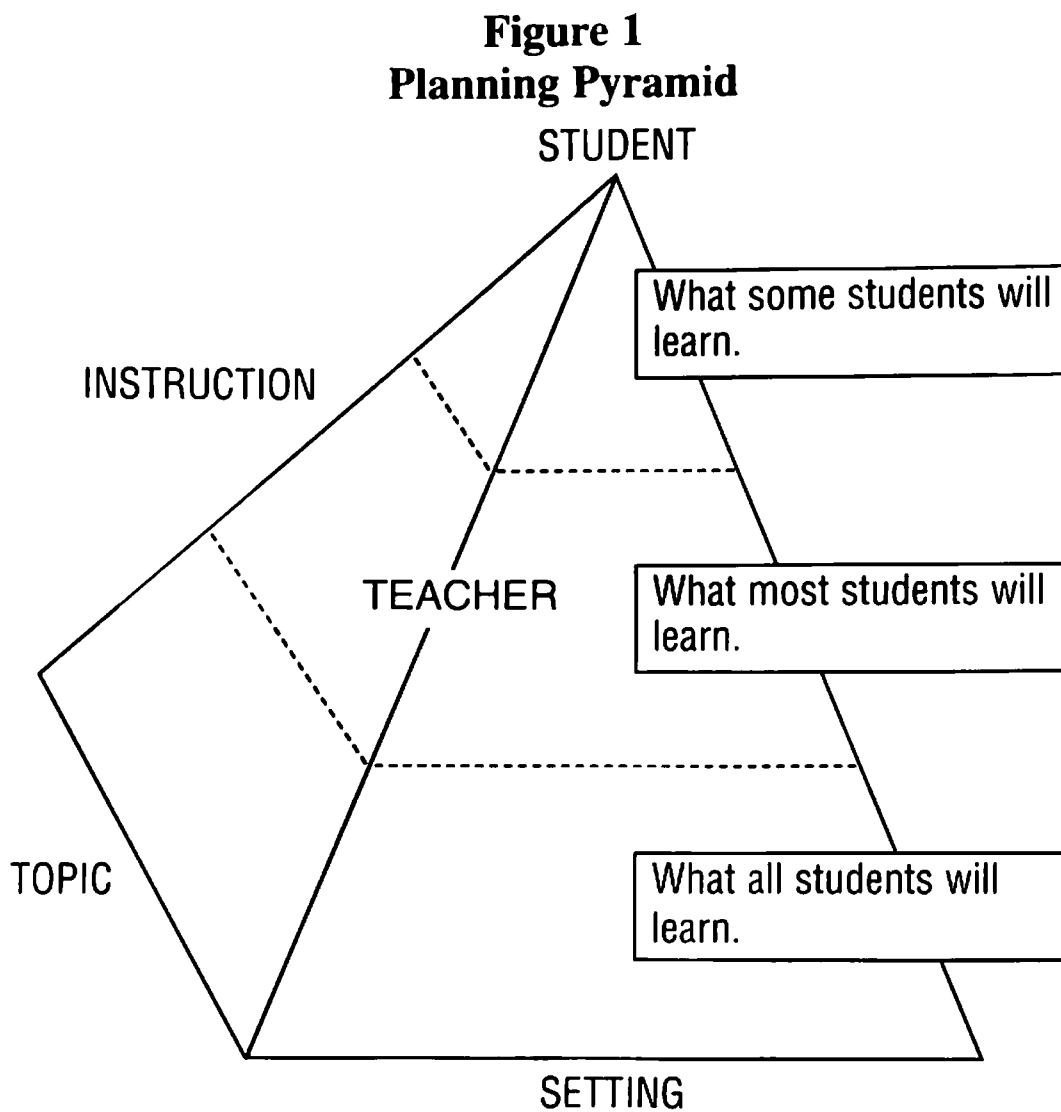
because Tanya was outgoing at home, but seemed disinterested in even attempting her math homework. They were eager to work with her fourth-grade teacher to help Tanya succeed at school.

For classroom teachers, the charge to educate all students takes on a new meaning when Steven and Tanya arrive to class with a wide range of learning abilities and behavioral needs. While teachers are eager to find instructional practices they can use with the class as a whole that will benefit low-achieving students (Vaughn, Hughs, Schumm, & Klinger, 1998), they are more likely to implement only those adaptations that can be made "on the fly" during instruction (Schumm & Vaughn, 1992). The dilemma is complicated further because developing lessons for one student within a classroom can single out that student as well as overwhelm the teacher during planning and instruction (Stainback, Stainback, & Stefanich, 1996). So how do teachers meet the individual needs of students within a large classroom? Research supports the idea that when teachers incorporate various levels of instruction for many different students into unit or lesson planning, students can work toward individual objectives within the context of large group instruction (Schumm, Vaughn, & Leavell, 1994; Stainback et al., 1996).

This article provides practical suggestions that teachers individually or in collaboration with researchers and school personnel can implement to make classrooms flexible, comfortable, and challenging learning environments for diverse students. Perhaps most importantly, these accommodations can be made without sacrificing the learning of average and high-achieving students. We will begin with a discussion of the Planning Pyramid (Schumm et al., 1994), a framework for planning lessons in classrooms that include students with a wide range of abilities. We follow with special considerations for students with behavior problems and conclude with a brief discussion of professional development options to support teachers in their efforts to meet these challenges.

THE PLANNING PYRAMID

The Planning Pyramid (see Figure 1) provides guidelines for planning instruction in inclusive classrooms. It is especially useful in planning content area lessons such as social studies and science, where there is great variation in student ability levels and where many children encounter new vocabulary and concepts (Schumm et al., 1994).



Adapted from "Planning Pyramid: A Framework for Planning for Diverse Student Needs During Content Area Instruction," by J. S. Schumm, S. Vaughn, and A. Leavell, 1994, *The Reading Teacher*, 47, pp. 608-615.

DEGREES OF LEARNING

The Planning Pyramid has three layers, termed Degrees of Learning. The layer at the base of the pyramid represents "what all students will learn." This layer contains the largest volume of material. The middle layer represents "what most, but not all students will learn"; and the smallest layer represents "what some students will learn." The premise is that all students can learn, but all students may not be ready to learn all of the content covered. The most important part of the Planning Pyramid occurs before instruction. In terms of content, a teacher might ask these three questions:

1. What aspects of this instructional unit do I want all students to learn?
2. What do I want most students to learn?
3. What information will a few students learn?

The Planning Pyramid is an organizational tool designed to focus instruction to maximize learning for all students. However, it is not meant to limit expectations or opportunities to learn. On the contrary, all students have

equal access to information, although presentation may vary according to students' needs. It is essential that activities at the bottom of the pyramid be just as stimulating and fun as those at the top. Finally, students are not assigned levels based on their academic ability alone. Prior knowledge, interest, and ability will vary with content and lesson format, and so Pyramid level will also vary from topic to topic. The guidelines for the Planning Pyramid should not be perceived as corresponding to ability groups.

POINTS OF ENTRY

In an inclusive classroom, it's not only what the teachers cover, but also how it is covered that determines what students learn. The second component of the Planning Pyramid, Points of Entry, guides teachers to think about factors that will affect the learning experience. The Points of Entry we consider for learning are students, teacher, topic, setting, and instructional practices. When planning for instruction, teachers consider how each Point of Entry might influence the learning experience. For example, concerns pertaining to Steven and Tanya would include: Will Steven be able to concentrate on this material? How can I encourage Tanya to participate when I introduce the lesson on making change with dollars and coins? During the unit on mammals, how can I tap into Steven's expertise (he knows more than I do about mammals!) without having him overshadow the rest of the class? Putting thought into Points of Entry will facilitate planning and instruction because issues will be identified that affect students' behavior, interest, and understanding before they come up in your classroom.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Accommodations are adjustments that teachers and school personnel make to maximize learning and social well-being for individual students. Accommodations can involve anything from arranging desks so a student with a walker is able to navigate the classroom to asking a parent volunteer to make tape recordings of class novels for a student who is not able to read grade-level texts independently. Bradley, King-Sears, and Tessier-Switlick (1996) suggest that accommodations "begin with creativity and end with logistics." Considering a lesson in terms of the Points of Entry, teachers may outline which accommodations will be chosen and for whom.

Many teachers find it useful to create a customized accommodation checklist for each student with special needs. Table 1 contains a partial list of accommodations that are feasible for most classrooms. A checklist helps teachers get away from relying on the same accommodations again and again. Note that these are only a sampling of possible accommodations, and teachers can develop a list that works for their teaching style and individual student needs.

Table 1
Accommodation Checklist

Instruction

- Use a multisensory approach.
- Use a highly structured format for presentations.
- Use graphic organizers.
- Present material in small, sequential steps.
- Teach specific strategies (e.g. taking notes, reading comprehension).
- Review key points frequently.
- Assign a buddy reader or note taker.
- Provide students with outline of notes.
- Use color coding to match materials and concepts.
- Reduce visual distractions.
- Seat student close to board, teacher, or student helper; away from door or window.
- Provide a quiet work area.
- Allow students to move if needed.
- Use visual reminders as memory aids.
- Use teacher-initiated signals for redirecting attention.
- Highlight sections of text.
- Provide tape recording of lecture or required texts.
- Give oral and written directions.
- Speak slowly and clearly.
- Allow for longer response time.

Organization and Task Completion

- Keep work area clear.
- Post assignments and work completed in a consistent spot.
- Assist student with notebook organization.
- Use assignment notebook.
- Extend time to complete assignments.
- Shorten or chunk assignments.
- Give timeline for longer projects.
- Give specific feedback.
- Provide peer tutoring.
- Use cooperative learning groups.
- Provide structured daily activities.
- Explain changes in routine.

Evaluation

- ___ Explain grading and give rubric.
- ___ Give specific feedback.
- ___ Preview before test; give frequent quizzes; give sample questions.
- ___ Orient student to test format.
- ___ Use a clear, uncluttered copy; enlarge print.
- ___ Make test directions simple and clear.
- ___ Provide ample space for answers on test.
- ___ Allow alternate test response (oral, computer).
- ___ Read test aloud to student.
- ___ Give open-note or take-home tests.
- ___ Use alternate forms of evaluation (oral report, group projects, and debate).
- ___ Reduce required assignments.
- ___ Provide proofreading checklist.
- ___ Accept print or cursive writing.

Adapted from *Teaching Students in Inclusive Settings: From Theory to Practice* (pp. 248-249), by D. F. Bradley, M. E. King-Sears, and D. M. Tessier-Switlick, 1996, Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

USING THE PLANNING PYRAMID

We offer the following suggestions for using the planning pyramid in the classroom.

1. Lesson overview

Begin by thinking about the lesson. Use the Points of Entry as a guideline to ensure that an array of variables is considered. How will the topic, teacher, students, and setting affect the instruction for this lesson?

2. Degrees of learning

Identify concepts for each of the Degrees of Learning and record them on the lesson planning form (Figure 2). Use state or district guidelines, grade-level team plans, textbook objectives, and personal judgment to establish objectives for each level of the Planning Pyramid. Consultation with colleagues or school personnel to help identify areas of potential difficulty for students with disabilities may be helpful. What key vocabulary, concepts, or advanced organizers will be provided to set the stage for a successful learning experience for the students?

3. Instructional strategies

Identify the instructional strategies that will be used during this lesson. Refer to students' accommodations checklists to ensure that necessary adaptations have been considered. At this point, consider the following areas in terms of students with special needs (Schumm, Vaughn, & Harris, 1997):

- Grouping (cooperative learning with assigned roles, pairs)
- Presenting information (introduce key vocabulary, modify pacing of instruction)
- Learning strategies (provide outline for note taking, teach comprehension strategies)
- Reading levels (supply study guides, peer to read questions; provide books at different reading levels)

4. Sequence of activities

List the sequence of activities on the lesson planning form. Remember that this is the agenda for all levels. Be sure to note how the lesson will be adapted for the degrees of learning. Record any special accommodations (chunk assignment into smaller pieces, produce work on computer). List the materials needed to implement the lesson and homework assignments.

5. Evaluation

Decide how progress will be monitored and record it on the lesson planning form. Teachers check for understanding throughout lessons by asking questions, monitoring work, facilitating discussions, and assessing student work. By evaluating performance in a variety of ways, teachers can make instructional decisions to maximize student learning. Is there a need to review the material for certain students, present concepts in another form, or move on to the next topic?

Tests are a common way to evaluate learning. For this reason, it is especially important for tests accurately to reflect what students know. Accommodations and adaptations on tests are often necessary to allow students with individual differences to perform to their fullest capability. Not all students will require every accommodation. Therefore, use of the individualized accommodations checklist will guide decisions relative to testing modifications.

Students should be prepared to take tests. They should be familiar with the directions and format before taking the test. Provide opportunities to complete sample items and teach test-taking strategies such as carefully reading the directions or answering the easy questions first.

When preparing tests, make sure the print is clear and large enough to read easily. Write directions plainly and in simple sentences and read directions aloud if needed. Leave adequate space between items and in answer

spaces and delete any unnecessary or distracting information (Salend, 1995). Provide a shortened version of the test or an alternate format for students with individualized learning objectives. During testing, allow extra time to complete the test and provide breaks if needed. And if it is not necessary to use a traditional test format, try other ways to evaluate learning such as portfolios of student assignments, projects, reports, individual conferences, and self-reflection.

6. Reflection

After the lesson, reflect on how concepts at all degrees of learning were presented and evaluate student understanding. After two or three lessons, assess the use of the Planning Pyramid. If necessary, make alterations to fit personal working style. If other colleagues are also using the Planning Pyramid, share ideas and consider suggestions for improvement.

FINAL NOTES ON THE PLANNING PYRAMID

General education teachers at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels have used the Planning Pyramid. Teachers have provided positive feedback for its use in classes of students with diverse needs. Observations of teachers using the Planning Pyramid inform us that teachers increase the explicitness and clarity about what students must learn. Students are not bogged down by the overwhelming amount of information presented and have a clearer grasp of what they should know and how to accomplish the tasks that lead to new understanding (Schumm et al., 1994).

CONSIDERATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH BEHAVIOR DIFFICULTIES

Teaching students with behavior difficulties in inclusive classrooms can be very stressful. Implementing behavior intervention strategies that allow a student to reach his or her potential can take its toll on even the most experienced teachers. Research suggests that perhaps the most important aspect of teaching students with behavior difficulties is to create a positive classroom climate (Abrams & Segal, 1998).

Elements of positive classroom climate include:

- Order, structure, and consistency.
- Well-organized and predictable environment.
- Clear, realistic expectations.
- Students experience success, academically and socially.
- Curriculum emphasizes student interests and talents.
- Teacher able to interpret communicative intent of students.

- Students given choices and input into classroom decisions.
- Students encouraged to express feelings.
- Students able to interact socially with others.
- Students' psychological needs (belonging, safety, competence, and self-esteem) met.
- Positive teacher-student relationship.

With the growing number of students like Steven in general education classrooms, teachers frequently ask for assistance in working with students with ADHD. Students with ADHD can have trouble paying attention, following directions, working independently, and staying seated (Gardill, DuPaul, & Kyle, 1996). Knowing students well and preparing lessons with their needs in mind can set the scene for success. The following considerations have proven to be effective ways to maximize learning and minimize classroom disruptions for students with ADHD (See Gardill, et al., 1996 for further discussion).

1. **Structure.** Provide students with a daily schedule that includes transition times and special events, and review schedule periodically.
2. **Physical space.** Consider the arrangement of the room and seating for individual students. Who needs to be close to the teacher and who needs to be farthest from distracting noises?
3. **Novelty.** Vary lesson and activity format and consider active (making a diorama, giving a presentation) rather than passive (completing a worksheet) forms of student output whenever possible. Consider the order of activities, moving from a quiet activity (journal writing) to a more lively one (cooperative learning).
4. **Brevity.** Try to keep a quick pace. Move through activities with many opportunities for student response and teacher feedback. Consider which students may need shortened or chunked assignments or periodic breaks.
5. **Focus.** Help ADHD students focus using verbal and nonverbal cues, individual checklists, timers, or a buddy monitor to remind the student to stay on task. Check for understanding after directions are given and again when work begins.
6. **Peers.** Pair students up for activities. Use pairs to practice spelling words or math facts. Have ADHD students do a hands-on activity with a partner or read in pairs to increase on-task behavior.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Research reveals that general education teachers frequently do not feel prepared to meet the academic and behavioral needs of students with disabilities in their classrooms and request professional development opportunities to support their teaching situations (Schumm & Vaughn, 1992; Semmel, Abernathy, Butera, & Lesar, 1991). The professional development may

include but is not limited to school-based workshops, university courses, opportunities to visit other teachers' classrooms, teacher-to-teacher mentor programs, teacher study groups that allow teachers to work collaboratively to find solutions, studying a book by a professional in the field, and trying out a new teaching method.

Unfortunately, a one- or two-day staff development session does not seem to be enough to give teachers the understanding and experience they need to implement changes in their classrooms (Malouf & Schiller, 1995; Peterson, 1995). The most effective professional development is ongoing, wherein teachers and school personnel have access to a variety of topic areas over an extended period of time (Vaughn & Schumm, 1995). After extensive experience providing long-term (over the course of at least one school year) support for teachers in inclusive settings, we have found that the length of support is only the first step to creating change in delivering appropriate instruction. In addition to a substantial time commitment, teachers must be provided with educational experiences that are specific; and they must observe demonstration lessons in their classrooms, receive feedback during their own implementation of new methods, and be given release time to collaborate with other teachers (Vaughn et al., 1998).

Teachers want the satisfaction of knowing that they meet the educational and social needs of all their students. In order for this to occur, teachers must be comfortable with a wide range of strategies and accommodations that they can implement to assure that the learning needs of students like Steven and Tanya are met. Furthermore, these accommodations and adaptations must be ones that teachers can make within their existing schedules. The instructional practices advocated in this article provide a first step to improving education for students with learning disabilities and behavioral difficulties.

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