

# MILLION DOLLAR QUESTION

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*This is the second article in John O'Connor's series on how special education leaders can effectively become champions of GREAT instruction to radically improve the achievement and performance of students with disabilities. John O'Connor is the Executive Director of Special Services with the DeKalb County School System (Georgia) that includes 8,400 students with disabilities.*

## Specialized Instruction – Dialing it Up

As special education professionals, how can we radically improve the achievement of students with disabilities? We must provide great instruction in every school, during every class period, in every classroom. That GREAT instruction must be:

- Guided by the performance standards
- Rigorous with research based strategies
- Engaging and exciting
- Assessed continuously to guide instruction, and
- Tailored (differentiated) through flexible groups.

For special education leaders, the second “r” – research-based strategies - involves the delivery of “specialized instruction.” For almost 40 years, special education has been defined as the provision of specialized instruction. But what is specialized instruction? If you gathered all of your special education leaders and teachers in a room and asked them to define “specialized instruction,” they may paraphrase that, “specialized instruction is individually designed instruction, as documented on a student’s IEP, that will meet the student’s unique needs.” That may be legally accurate, but it surely doesn’t tell you much.

If we, as special education leaders, are going to be champions of GREAT instruction, then we must first have a precise vision of what that instruction should “look like.” Even though we are responsible for providing an individualized educational program for each student with a disability, there can be common themes that address the second part of the “R” in GREAT instruction – research based instructional strategies.

I propose that there are specific instructional practices at the heart of “specialized instruction.” These instructional practices are needed by virtually every student with a disability and should be dialed up or dialed down depending on the unique needs of each child and the content being taught. These practices certainly do not meet all instructional needs, nor are they an exhaustive list, but they are the foundation of specialized instruction. (Because of limited space, only three practices will be described that should be seen in all content areas with additional practices specifically for math added in the next issue.) As special education leaders, we need to work diligently toward consistently providing these practices in general education classes with one teacher, in co-teaching classes, and in pull-out special education classes.

*Radically increase practice turns and feedback.* Across the board, students with disabilities need more practice turns and feedback than their peers without disabilities. It may take a student with a disability dozens of attempts before he or she

gains proficiency in a skill while other students acquire mastery with much less practice. Therefore, we must make sure that we radically increase the number of attempts that students take and the feedback they receive.

Unfortunately, many of our students with mild disabilities are masters at becoming invisible in our classrooms. They have determined that if they don’t misbehave, they won’t be asked to fully participate. If they comply, they can disappear. Instead of extensive practice and feedback, they might only take a few turns during every class period – certainly not the “specialized instruction” that we promise.

When we observe in our classrooms, we should see fast-paced action with students continuously in academic motion. Students should participate in constant practice and receive feedback from their teachers, their peers, computer applications, or well developed self-checking mechanisms. If our students are going to master grade level content and fill their academic holes, they must have countless turns and receive targeted, differentiated feedback on those efforts.

*Provide explicit instruction.* Some talented students perform quite well with a constructivist approach to teaching. Most students with disabilities, however, need explicit instruction to master many skills, processes and academic competencies. Decades ago Anita Archer coined the phrase, “I do it; We do it; You do it,” to beautifully describe explicit instruction. Most of our students with disabilities need clear modeling, guided practice and then independent practice. Students need to see what it looks like, attempt the skill or process with scaffolded support and then attempt the skill independently.

Sometimes that arch of instruction will include many students over an entire class period and sometimes it involves individual instruction to a student when he asks for help. “Let me show you how. Let’s do it together. Now, you try it.”

Unfortunately, explicit instruction has gotten an undeserved bad reputation as some consider it the opposite of rigorous instruction. This perception is false. A few years ago, I was installing wainscoting in my kitchen while possessing very few “handyman” skills. Fortunately, a neighbor who is a master carpenter worked with me as I learned to use the appropriate saws, measure for accuracy, and install (almost) seamless corners. He showed me how to do it. I tried it with his help. Then, I did it independently. After a few days, I was on my own and only called him when I needed some input. My neighbor, who had no training in pedagogy, provided explicit instruction.

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implementation plan. Investment by all stakeholders is essential for success!

Plans for development and implementation, including an extensive professional development component for staff, were well received. School principals were very interested in the prospects of including students with disabilities in their schools and were inquisitive about the approach, training and resources that would be provided, as one would imagine. We were encouraged by some of the comments from administrators we spoke to and saw some examples of how we might suggest building on some practices they were already engaged in, such as using a resource room model for specialized instruction.

### **More alike than different...**

As we have come to realize, the concerns and inquiries we encounter to this day, as we continue to strive for greater participation

in inclusive environments in our schools and communities, are much the same in Kuwait. Going back several years to when we started making great strides, much of the journey will be along the same roads and some will come along at a faster pace than others as the process becomes established, despite cultural differences.

It will take great leaders working together to make this promise a reality for Kuwaitis. I am pleased to have some small part in influencing this as we move forward. It will truly be an awesome event as the plans develop and this goal to improve the quality of life and services for people with disabilities in Kuwait becomes a reality sooner than later.

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His guidance wasn't insulting, juvenile, nor did it lack rigor. He provided the steps that I needed to gain those skills. As special education leaders, we must work with our teachers so students are provided that same type of explicit, systematic instruction.

*Provide effective vocabulary instruction.* Many students with disabilities have significant delays in their vocabulary development. That doesn't mean that they don't know the meanings of as many words as their peers. That may be true, but a limited vocabulary means much more than that. It means that many students with disabilities have significant gaps in concept knowledge. To oversimplify, if a student has a deep understanding of the term "airplane," then he understands related concepts of airplane food, security checkpoints, late arrivals, rough landings, take off thrust and military aircraft. All of those concepts create a fabric of understanding.

Unfortunately, many students with disabilities have processing problems, neurological issues, or other barriers that impede their ability to pick up new concepts as readily as their non-disabled peers. Over many years of learning fewer concepts and the connections between them, many students with disabilities have significant gaps in conceptual understanding which impacts further learning. Therefore, we must provide effective vocabulary instruction. Note the word effective. In many classrooms, vocabulary instruction is limited to writing definitions, copying words multiple times and completing word searches – the recipe for limited learning. Students must be given the opportunity to develop connections between terms, dissect words, build on their understandings, develop and expand visual organizers about words, compare their understandings with

their peers, and play vocabulary games. They must be provided explicit instruction in the multiple meanings of words, and then be given the opportunity to expand those definitions to connect to a larger fabric of concepts. Students must have the opportunity to re-visit terms and pile on new connections and meanings.

There are some disclaimers about this limited list. There are other instructional practices that should be included, but because of limited space are not (i.e., providing "fill-the-gap" instruction, using effective proactive and reactive strategies to promote appropriate behavior, etc.). In addition, these instructional practices do not replace, but rather lay over, what we know about specific content instruction. Since the overwhelming majority of students with disabilities struggle with reading, for example, special education teachers must be experts in providing instruction in the five dimensions of reading. The instructional practices listed here lay upon those specific instructional activities.

By radically increasing practice turns and feedback, providing explicit instruction and effective vocabulary development, we start to set the stage for specialized instruction.

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