

TEACHING SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS IN SECONDARY HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLASSES: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Teaching special needs students in a health and physical education environment can be a challenging proposition for even the most gifted and experienced educator. At the secondary level, specific guidelines need to be followed in order to initiate and maintain classroom control, management and discipline. Most importantly, effective pedagogy is paramount so that special needs students can maximize the benefits of their educational experiences within the content area. To that end, this presentation allows the authors to reveal information gathered via on site visits to a specialized secondary school in Windsor, Ontario, Canada, which consists of an entire special education population. The findings reflect the expertise of a veteran secondary school teacher familiar with and trained in both special education and health and physical education. A “road map for colleagues” has been generated as a result of the completed case study, and the information for practitioners is presented.

BACKGROUND

Over a recent 10 year period a collaboration has developed between the Faculty of Education, University of Windsor, Ontario (Canada) and Western Secondary School, a vocational high school located near Windsor. Specifically, each academic year a class of health and physical education (HPE) specialists who are in training to become teachers visit the Western campus. The purpose of the trip is to immerse teacher candidates in a “real world”, special education environment on both a macro (school wide)

and micro (HPE specific class) basis. The visit typically consists of a campus tour led by members of the Western student body, including a stop at the gymnasium where a physical education class in progress is observed. Thereafter, students who are enrolled in the culinary class at Western prepare a luncheon which they take part in creating and serving to their university guests. After lunch, Mr. Brent Webster, a veteran special education teacher and HPE department head, delivers a presentation for the teachers in training with respect to the practical aspects of supporting special needs students within the HPE setting.

By way of additional introduction, Western Secondary School is a vocational school consisting of grades 9 to 12, located in Southwestern Ontario, near Windsor, Ontario, Canada. Current enrollment is 546 identified students, with 440 being classified as modified students, and 106 adaptive basic. Students are placed at Western through an Identification Placement Review Committee (IPRC), a process which includes input from the student in question, their parent/guardian, a Western school official as well as an official from the student's previous school. Once admitted the student may not switch schools unless demitted through another IPRC meeting and process. Scholastically, students are timetabled with half academic and half technical subjects. The Academic stream includes subjects such as mathematics, English, geography, history, science, civics, careers, and general learning expectations (GLE). Technical subjects offered include: horticulture, carpentry, auto service, auto body, auto detailing, small engines, welding, property maintenance, cosmetology, food preparation, baking, computers, art, fashion design and parenting.

Given this background information, the purpose of this paper is to provide professional educators within the area of special education and health and physical education with a "best practices" perspective. Specifically, Mr. Brent Webster, the HPE department head and special education certified teacher at Western Secondary School, will be sharing the "Western Way" as it relates to the aforementioned topic.

MAJOR CATEGORIES OF EXCEPTIONALITES FOR IDENTIFIED

STUDENTS AT WESTERN SECONDARY SCHOOL

For purposes of clarity, the following categories of exceptionalities have been identified as being currently present at Western Secondary School.

- *Behaviour disorders**
- *Autism**
- * Deaf and Hard of Hearing**
- * Learning Disabled (ADD / ADHD / ODD etc.)**
- * Speech Impairment**
- * Language Impairment**
- * Mild Intellectual Disability**
- * Developmental Disability**
- * Physical Disability**
- * Blind and Low Vision**
- * Multiple Exceptionalities (A combination of the above categories)**

It is possible, if not probable, for teachers at Western to encounter some or even ALL of the aforementioned categories of disability within the same class at the same time. Certainly, this composition could test even the most gifted differentiated instructor! This unique teaching environment demands specific methods of delivery in order to accommodate the many special students who comprise a given classroom.

To achieve this end, a team approach has been developed at Western for providing students with the best possible instruction. Through continuous

teacher in-servicing along with daily anecdotal feedback between staff members and administrators, a specific set of SOP's (Standard Operating Procedures) have come into practice over time. What follows is a list of many of the key pedagogical considerations that have been embraced and proven successful by staff members at Western Secondary School.

DELIVERING THE GOODS: A ROAD MAP FOR COLLEAGUES

The following information reflects the teaching approach that has been undertaken at Western over the past decade. These practices are “tried and true” and represent practical bits of information from practitioners who live their application daily. These concepts have been, and continue to be, a staple of the pedagogy for teachers at Western Secondary School. They are presented in no particular order of preference.

- 1. Utilize Team teaching (combine classes) whenever scheduling permits.**
This allows for more effective student groupings while assisting in overseeing this specialized student population, re: safety concerns. Having more students in the gym at the same time allows for greater flexibility in ability grouping, something that has been very productive for the Western students.
- 2. Conduct all PE in a co-educational environment.**
The purpose is to increase socializing opportunities. Teachers themselves model appropriate behaviours between the genders and it is felt that co-ed classes greatly assist in student's social development. However, given often sensitive content themes, health education is delivered in gender specific environments at the grade 9 level. Thereafter, co-ed classes are re-introduced for health education.
- 3. Include a leadership component in all Senior PE classes.**
Teaching this unique population about leadership can be challenging, but there are always opportunities to promote and reward leadership. For

example, each year the new crop of HPE teachers from our local faculty of Education (School of Education) visit the Western campus and are escorted by students throughout their stay. These particular students are part of the leadership group and take great pride in their service to the school in such instances.

4. Offer non traditional games and activities such as archery, ringette, yoga, etc.

Many times, traditional games and associated rules of engagement are not plausible for some groups of special education students. As such, the teachers at Western have utilized many activities that go beyond the mainstream of physical activity in order to engage as many students as possible.

5. For traditional games, we offer CHOICES

Some students might favour recreational activities over competitive situations, and the school staff attempts to accommodate these requests whenever possible. This type of inclusionary approach helps to satisfy the needs and goals of a wide range of students.

6. Inclusion of WOAA (Western Ontario Athletics Association) Varsity Athletics.

There are 3 additional vocational schools within a 2 hour radius of Windsor, allowing Western to conduct varsity sports and compete with the other three schools.

7. Incorporate HUMOUR into your teaching!

Teachers at Western often target themselves, and each other, as the brunt of jokes and humour. This is especially prevalent when teaching skills which may lead to frustration for students. They will demonstrate a skill, make a mistake in the process, then make light of the fact that “nobody’s perfect, especially not Mr. Webster”. It helps to support the idea that they encourage you to try the skill and not worry about making mistakes.

8. A primary focus is ALWAYS...SAFETY - SAFETY - SAFETY !!!

9. Establish clear and consistent routines/procedures.

* Entry and Exit (Changing Rooms)

- * Attendance
- * Injuries / Illnesses

10. Modify activities to suit your needs

- * Equipment
- * Rules of the game
- * Expectations

Certainly, the range of abilities in a special education classroom will be greater than in a “regular” classroom. Use the strengths of some students to overcome the weaknesses of others. (ie partners/teams/groups)

11. Utilize the Support systems available to you.

- * **Education Assistants (EA); Learning Support Teachers (LST); Child and Youth Workers (CYW); Development Services Workers (DSW); Teaching Partners and Other Students**

12. For Difficult students - read their Ontario Student Report (OSR)

This is a folder that contains the entire educational history of a given student and travels with him/her from school to school during the course of their academic career.

13. Plan on Encouragement as a function of your pedagogy.

Positive reinforcement goes a long way with all students, but **ESPECIALLY SO** with these students. Get parents on board in this regard as early as possible.

14. Ask students how they were previously integrated into activities.

If a student has particular activities that they enjoy and are able to participate in (given their own unique disability) it makes sense to utilize these activities for the student in question. Take the time to ask the student for such information.

HOW WOULD YOU INTEGRATE THE FOLLOWING DIASABLED STUDENTS INTO THESE HPE ACTIVITIES?

- 1. Wheelchair students into floor hockey?**
- 2. Low vision students into basketball?**
- 3. A group of ADD / ADHD students into a 75 min volleyball class?**
- 4. A LARGE range of athletic abilities into a game of indoor soccer?**
- 5. A class of adaptive students into a badminton class?**

CONCLUSION

There is no magic formula, no perfect pedagogy when it comes to teaching special needs individuals within the health and physical education context. However, certain truisms have come to light for the faculty and staff at Western Secondary School as reflected in the previous pages. Hopefully, for teachers struggling to cope with special needs populations within their own classrooms, these ideas will help to increase both teacher and student enjoyment as they all strive to fulfill their potential as life long learners.

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