

Continuum of Services for Students with Learning Disabilities: A Middle School and High School Dilemma

Karen Schulte, Assistant Professor, Department of Special Education, Eastern Michigan University

Special education was created, in part, to provide students with disabilities additional, specialized educational and behavioral interventions – interventions not typically available through general education programs. It is often difficult to balance our focus on providing these specialized interventions with our belief that students with disabilities benefit from being in the general education environment. Now, more than ever, the field of learning disabilities is struggling with this issue, particularly on the middle school and high school levels.

What Is A Continuum of Services?

Central to the concept of special education is the idea that the Individual Education Planning Team (IEPT) will collaboratively determine the special and general education services a student needs, based on the goals and objectives developed for him or her. This process is meant to ensure that each student will receive services tailored specifically to his or her unique set of needs. Common practice, however, sometimes follows the reverse of this process: IEPTs often determine programs and services based on what is available, rather than what is appropriate and necessary to meet specified goals and objectives. In order for this process to be effective, a full continuum of service options must be available. For students with learning disabilities, this continuum typically includes those services described in Figure 1.

The Historical Perspective

Prior to the passage of *Public Law 94-142 Education of All Handicapped Children* in 1975, few, if any, programs existed for students with learning disabilities. With the passage of this legislation, we began to develop services ranging from self-contained classrooms to teacher consultant services. In an attempt to provide the direct, intensive remedial instruction that students with learning disabilities had been lacking up to this point, many students with learning disabilities were removed from substantive portions of the general education program. This was seen as necessary in order to provide the specialized instruction each student needed in reading, writing, mathematics and other areas. Special educators were trained in multiple intervention methodologies. Self-contained classrooms and resource rooms provided the structure to support such instruction.

A Move Toward Least Restrictive Environment

Over the last twenty-five years, many in the field have become dissatisfied with this approach to providing specialized instruction. Just as special education services for other disability areas have moved toward more “inclusive” models, the field of learning disabilities began to focus more on students’ successful participation in general education and less on providing specialized instruction through special education. The number of self-contained classroom programs for students with learning disabilities decreased, particularly on the middle school and high school level. Although resource rooms remain the primary service delivery model at these levels, full-time placement in general education is increasing. The reason for this is threefold. Many feel that by this time in a student’s life, there should be a shift from remediation to compensation in the basic skill areas. Additionally, there is a strong feeling that students with learning disabilities can and should master the content provided through general education. Lastly, placement in the

general education program is considered advantageous for social, emotional and behavioral reasons.

Two political influences have added to this shift. The definition of “highly qualified teacher” in *No Child Left Behind* left many middle and high school special education teachers considered “not highly qualified” to teach content areas. The *Michigan Merit Curriculum* mandates that all students must take the required general education courses to earn a high school diploma, with the exception of those students found eligible for a personalized curriculum. High schools and middle schools have had to redefine the continuum of special education services available in response to these political influences.

The Consequences

It is difficult to argue that students should not be educated in the least restrictive environment, but this must be coupled with two other considerations – the need to provide a quality education for each student, based on his or her individual needs. These considerations often “get lost in the shuffle” as middle schools and high schools move toward a more narrow definition of a continuum of services to meet the requirements of *No Child Left Behind* and the *Michigan Merit Curriculum*. This shift in program options is often implemented quickly, with little time to think about the consequences. Only in the second or third year of implementation are we beginning to see some of the unintended consequences:

- Resource rooms are becoming a “do-everything” program model. They are expected to provide direct instruction, support general education curriculum and create an avenue for collaboration between special and general educators to accommodate and modify classroom instruction. Resource room teachers are very often also expected to co-teach and to participate in the assessment and referral processes for students. We have created a job description and a program model that is, perhaps, “un-do-able.”
- As a result of this, resource room teachers report that they have little or no time to provide direct remedial instruction. Very often students with learning disabilities on the middle and high school levels receive no specialized instruction in areas such as reading, writing and mathematics. Resource room time is completely taken up with supporting the requirements in general education classes.
- Co-teaching has become the primary service delivery model in many middle and high schools. Although co-teaching is an effective strategy, it does not meet *all* the needs of *all* students with learning disabilities, and very often the special education personnel in a building have little time to do anything besides co-teach.
- The role of teacher consultant services to provide indirect support through collaboration with general education teachers has been severely limited, due to a lack of time and personnel to provide these services.

Conclusion

“First, it important to remember that most of us still believe that students with learning disabilities do have lifelong disabilities. If they are to be eligible for services under IDEA, they require ‘specifically designed instruction.’ Dr. Zigmond, for example, has documented that even co-teaching, a primary inclusion model, provides good general education but not the intensive instruction that would be described as specially designed instruction” (Shaw, 2007). Those of us in the field of learning disabilities need to take time to examine what we believe about the nature

of learning disabilities and define our role in providing both support for students in general education and direct, specialized and intensive instruction. Of particular importance are the balance of time and effort between support and instruction and the availability of all special education service options. This is particularly true for those on the middle school and high school levels. Only by defining and providing a full continuum of special education services will we be able to offer the options intended through an Individual Education Plan, truly providing the ‘special’ education our students deserve.

References

Shaw, S. (2007). Services for students with learning disabilities: It’s the program not the place. *New Times for DLD*, 25(2), 1-2.

Figure 1
Continuum of Special Education Services

