

The Quality Inclusion Process: Assuring the Quality of Inclusive Practices for Students With Disabilities

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As a substitute teacher in a seventh grade German language class, I had anticipated some surprises that ordinarily go with the job of temporary teacher. I reviewed the day's lesson plans and noted that the students were to plan and design activities for the upcoming "German Festival Week". Creating a dinner menu was one of their assignments. It seemed an appropriate task for a first year German class but I planned for the possibility of some students needing extra help. What I had not planned for, however, was adapting the lesson plan left by the teacher to meet Sara's needs. A note attached to the lesson plan informed me that Sara, a student with mental retardation was in this class for purposes of socialization as part of the school inclusion plan.

The bell rang and Sara lumbered into the classroom, loudly exclaiming "Hi guys" at no one in particular. She spotted me at the front of the room. "Hey who are you? You're not pretty like Mrs. Brown. She's my friend. She's nice. I like her. She has Fluffy. Like my dog. Do you have a dog?" Before I could answer, Sara abruptly turned and went to her seat. A student, sitting in a front row seat whispered to me, "Sara likes to talk. We don't mind. She's in my music class too, but most of the time she's in Mrs. Jones' special class."

This vignette, illustrates how educators are trying to address a provision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) referred to as "least restrictive environment". Simply stated, least restrictive environment means that students with disabilities must be educated with typically developing students whenever possible. Some school professionals have interpreted this in a more general way and argue that children with disabilities should be fully included in the regular classroom. There are concerns however, that children with disabilities may be placed into classes that do not meet their special needs (Turnbull, Shank, & Leal 1995).

We support the idea that inclusive practices benefit students with disabilities when they are involved in meaningful social interactions with all members of a school community. But how do we assure the quality of that inclusion?

In this article we present a decision making process model for designing inclusive quality programs that transcends the traditional boundaries of classroom settings by matching the learner's needs with teaching opportunities that take place in traditional and distinctive situations. Using Sara's case as an example, we are guided by the following questions-What social skills does Sara

need to learn in order to gain a substantive role in a peer group? What specific instructional strategies would be required to teach Sara these specific social skills? Who would be responsible for instruction and supervision of Sara's learning? Finally, what situations or contexts of social interaction exist in the school community that could enhance this teaching and learning process?

What is Quality Inclusion?

We define quality inclusion as an educational strategy which provides a holistic and practical way to assure that the specific learning needs of students with disabilities are met. This process, what we call the Quality Inclusion Process, is based on the celebrated PDCA (Plan, Do, Check, Act) improvement cycle developed by Walter Shewhart and popularized by W. Edwards Deming (1986). As shown in Figure 1 (on page 17), the process includes:

1. *Planning.* Identify student needs or objectives from IEPs and other requirements, identify learning context, identify instructional strategies and identify support personnel needed to instruct and supervise the learning.
2. *Doing.* Pilot the process or learning needs. The pilot involves communicating objectives, context, and strategies with all applicable personnel, follow up to assure learning objectives were met and establish revisions when necessary.
3. *Checking.* Evaluate the pilot phase by posing the question: "What can be improved?"
4. *Acting.* Make and implement revisions to the process. Proceed with the next phase to close the continuous process loop. This closure serves to validate the process. Validating means assuring that the process does what you intended it to do.

Planning is the heart of the Quality Inclusion Process. If any step in this phase is omitted, neglected, or inaccurate, the process breaks down and attainment of learning objectives cannot be assured. Using Sara's case as an example, let's look at each phase of the model beginning with planning.

Planning

Identify Learner Needs and Objectives

The first step in our decision-making model involves the specific identification of the learner's needs. We are referring to the skills that the student must learn. These skills are typically based upon assessment data and are often included in the student's Individual Edu-

cation Plan or IEP document. In our example of Sara, you will recall that she was in the German class to learn "socialization skills", but what exactly does this mean? We must be able to identify particular skills that we want Sara to learn, and these skills must be expressed in measurable, behavioral terms. For example, "Sara will take turns in conversation with less than three interruptions" is a clear and measurable objective that pertains to the broader concept of socialization. Knowing exactly what Sara is to learn will enable us to locate a context that will facilitate her learning.

Identify Contexts for Learning

The Quality Inclusion Process connects the learning needs of the student with the best context or situation for acquiring specific skills. In contrast to a setting, a context is not a place. It is an activity or authentic situation that naturally encompasses particular kinds of knowledge. For example, many students with mild disabilities demonstrate difficulty establishing and sustaining social interactions with others. In some cases these difficulties arise from inadequate communication skills, such as knowing how to start a conversation, how to stay on a topic, how and when to change topics, and how to terminate a conversation appropriately. An appropriate context for learning these skills would involve activities where conversations predominate.

In Sara's case, we identified one specific skill, turn-taking in conversation. The second step in the planning phase of Sara's individualized program is to determine the best context for learning to take turns in conversation. To guide our decision-making we pose the question: Where and when are conversations most likely to occur in school? The technique of brainstorming is effective for generating many possible ideas. After evaluating each of the ideas on our list, we selected two or three best contexts for engaging in conversations. For Sara, these contexts were eating lunch, waiting in line for the bus, and a class discussion.

Select Instructional Strategies

Although there are a number of different instructional strategies that can be used to teach Sara social skills, the strength of a particular strategy will be influenced by the situation in which the skill is being taught. Some possibilities are: a) brief lecture and discussion, b) role playing, c) direct instruction, and/or d) peer tutoring.

Brief lectures last about five minutes and students are encouraged to ask questions or make comments. They differ from formal lectures in length and the degree of active student participation.

Role-playing is a technique that engages the student in viewing a problem from multiple perspectives. The student can practice the skill in a simulated activity and gain an understanding of how the skill is perceived by other people.

Direct instruction (Gersten, Woodward & Darch 1986) involves six critical features: a step by step strategy, mastery at each step, process corrections for student errors, gradual fading from teacher directed activities, use of systematic practice with many examples

and a comprehensive review of learned concepts.

Peer tutoring involves an instructional arrangement in which the teacher pairs two students in a tutor-tutee relationship. The success of this technique is influenced by the training given to the tutor and the appropriateness of the instructional goals.

Given Sara's disability and the contexts selected in this case, Sara would most likely benefit from role playing, direct instruction, or peer tutoring. Direct instruction is useful for introducing the skill while a combination of strategies might be employed as the skill level becomes more complex.

Identify Support Personnel

In the final step of the planning phase, we generated a list of people who could use these instructional strategies to teach Sara the target skill. Obviously one person cannot be expected to shadow Sara throughout her daily activities in school, but we can identify people who are frequently present in these particular contexts of eating lunch, waiting for the bus and classroom discussions. Peers comprise our largest group of people in all three designated contexts. Additionally, we also wanted to consider lunch monitors, cafeteria workers, hall monitors or aides, regular education teachers and Sara's family members. Regular classroom teachers, special education teachers, speech and language therapists, volunteers, guest speakers and the principal are resources to consider during classroom discussions.

Most importantly, an instructional person and a primary support person must be identified. Let's suppose that the German language teacher agrees to teach Sara turn-taking during "German festival week" in her class. The instructional person is the German language teacher. The primary support person who has central responsibility for the teaching/learning program might be the special education teacher. The role of the primary support person (special education teacher) is to collect data, monitor and assist in adapting the teaching process over time.

Doing Piloting

Once we have planned for Sara's learning, we must guarantee the utility of the process by activating and completing the cycle. Figure 1 shows the utilization framework for our example. Doing includes piloting, or trying out the plans we made in the first step. Implementation of the plan could initially begin with the principal (ie. educational leader), the special education teacher (primary support person) and the German language teacher (instructional person). A brief meeting is conducted to reach an agreement on learner objectives and how those objectives are carried out and assessed.

Communication is critical to this phase of the process. The role of the principal is to facilitate the discussion, assist the team to move towards consensus, define and commit the next steps and reach timely closure. Team members must feel confident that the in-

structor has the skills necessary to assure learner success. If the instructor does not possess such skills, the primary support person must either train the person or select another instructor. Within the doing phase, observation and follow-up by primary support personnel with individuals responsible for instruction is crucial. This follow-up serves three functions: First, it assures that learning is being undertaken in accordance with established objectives. Second, it provides for improved communication and rapport between primary and secondary support personnel. Third, follow-up insures that the process is being used and provides an opportunity for improvement.

Checking

In this phase, the team analyzes the process for improvement. Using our example, the principal, the special education teacher and the German teacher would get together and share notes on their observations and follow-up communications. It is during this time that questions concerning process quality are asked. The team asks: To what extent has the process worked?, and What can be improved? It may be necessary to go back to the planning phase to revisit and analyze the learning objectives, the learning context and instructional strategies. Evaluation is necessary at this point to assure the overall success of the process. Note, Figure 2 page 17. (See Figure 2 for additional questions).

Acting

Once the quality inclusion process has been checked for improvement it is time to make any necessary changes. In our example we observed multiple conversations and activities within the hallway limited Sara's ability to focus on primary conversation. The team decided to change the context for her learning. Changing the context can require a different set of instructional skills or strategies and different instructor. It may also involve changing or clarifying the actual learning objectives for Sara. On the other hand, if our follow-up indicated that Sara's performance was satisfactory, then no revisions would be necessary at this point. Thus, actions taken here may require fundamental changes in the process or no changes at all.

When required changes are implemented it is time to again "cycle through" the quality inclusion process. This means that the team should review the entire process, making sure that the right questions are asked at each phase, that required revisions are implemented and evaluated. This continuous monitoring of the process enables team members to constantly revise and improve the process based on individual student needs, disabilities, and learning objectives.

To make sure that the process works for the next student, it is necessary to create a means of document storage and retrieval. In our example of Sara, the team documented each phase in a narrative format, e.g., memos and notes. These documents were summarized, transposed, and stored in a computer data base by the primary support person (the special education teacher). The files were organized by individual and by disability

and by specific contexts. Another useful categorization is by terminal learning objective. These different ordering schemes enable team members to access and cross-reference the quality inclusion process for future student needs based on any number of variables such as disability, needs, and learning objectives and contexts.

Benefits of the Quality Inclusion Process

The need for inclusion of students with disabilities is not in question here. What we have done is provide a process to assure the quality of that inclusion. Principals, teachers, and other support personnel need practical ways to carry out a high quality inclusion process that is transferable to every student, every disability, and every learning objective. Furthermore, a process is needed which can be continuously revised and improved upon over a long period of time. The quality inclusion process identified here meets these needs. The challenge to educators is to identify the right team members and make sure that they understand and can use the process. This necessity is reinforced by the fact that there are few educational processes where success is so intimately involved with so many diverse individuals.

Such models of quality inclusion for disabled students are only the beginning. The future demands that we continuously strive to provide long term educational and social opportunities for students with disabilities. What we may discover is that the same processes used to improve opportunities for students with disabilities can be applied with any student and in any educational setting. Thus, all students may benefit from the quality inclusion process.

References

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