GRADING IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Grading represents a series of procedures used to obtain information about student learning and education (observations, ratings of project realization, tests on paper and forming valuable judgements about the progress of learning).

There are many different approaches and ways to grade students with disabilities in inclusive settings. These different philosophies often come into conflict with one another and the assessment of a student's progress becomes a tense and stressful process for everyone that are involved. For students with disability educators, a fair and acceptable system of grading must be established before the grading happens. Above all, the grading system must be in accordance with the best practices, legal guidelines and the individual needs of the students who participate in the inclusive setting.

Through joint efforts from the members of the IEP team, they should advance to identify important issues and strategies for evaluation and grading.

The ratio of teachers towards the education of students with special needs is a deciding factor in increasing the inclusiveness of the school. Successful inclusion of the students with special educational needs in regular education depends largely on the availability of resources in the classroom and the way they are distributed by the teachers, also taking into account students without disabilities. The available time for teaching, knowledge, skills and working methods of the teacher also represents an important prerequisite for a successful inclusive process.

Key words: Grading, inclusive classroom, education, students with special needs.

Introduction

The number of students with disabilities included in general classes, as well as the amount of time they spend there, has increased dramatically in recent years. (Handler, 2003)

Many researchers agree that the best way to enhance learning for a diverse range of students is through appropriate, reliable, and valid classroom assessment and grading practices.

This is of particular importance in R. Macedonia because the inclusive philosophy has been mandated for all schools. Classroom teachers are responsible for the instruction, assessment, and grading of students with disabilities. That kind of process carries open questions and dilemmas which need to be met with the right lawful solutions.

Inclusion

Teachers have complex and varying attitudes toward inclusion. Educators tend to agree with the principle of placing students with disabilities in general education classrooms, although some controversy still exists.

Inclusion is a philosophy that bring students, families, educators and community member together to create schools and other social institutions based on acceptansce, belongins and community (Selend, S. 2001). The importance of the inclusive process is reflected through multiple levels but Geisthardt and Munsch (1996) stated that students with disabilities needed social interaction with nondisabled peers to develop friendships, leadership skills, and social competency. These skills offered students with disabilities the tools they needed to function socially both in school and in the community.

Successful inclusion relies a great deal on regulas education teachers, as well as special education teachers, administrators and parents. Their cooperation is critical and there is a need to further explore their attitudes, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of inclusion and integrating students with disabillities into regular education classrooms (Berg. L Shannon, 2004). School teams spend precious time creating the foundations of inclusive programs for students with disabilities. Careful thought goes into scheduling co-taught classes, creating balanced classroom rosters, training co-teaching partners, developing collaborative relationships, and providing appropriate supports for students with disabilities

However, even with well-planned inclusive services, general education teachers and co-teaching teams often struggle with how to effectively teach students with disabilities in general education classrooms. (Walther-Thomas, C., Korinek, L., McLaughlin, V. L., & Williams, B., 2000)

Grading

Grading is best understood as a shorthand method of communicating complicated information about student learning and progress. (Guskey, 2002)

A grade, such as a grade on a report card, is a summary of a teacher's judgment of the adequacy of a student's achievement at a particular point in time. Report card grades should reflect a student's achievement relative to the curriculum standards he or she is working toward. Studies done in the first half of the 20th century exposed early concerns about the validity of grades (Guskey, 1996). These concerns continue to this day, demonstrating that no single grading system fulfills all the purposes of grading and is seen as fair for all students.

Some teachers determine grades based solely on the student's academic performance; other teachers include factors not directly related to the demonstration of academic learning such as effort, participation, homework, spelling, work habits, or behavior. McMillan (2001) found that teachers grade mostly on achievement, but that they do consider other factors, such as homework and perceived effort.

The purpose of grading is to describe how well students have achieved the learning objectives or goals established for a class or course of study. Grades should reflect students' performance on specific learning criteria. Establishing clearly articulated criteria for grades makes the grading process more fair and equitable. Unfortunately, different teachers often use widely varying criteria in determining students' grades, and students often aren't well-informed about those criteria. Recognizing that merging diverse sources of evidence distorts the meaning of any grade, educators in many parts of the world assign multiple grades. This idea provides the foundation for standards-based approaches to grading. In particular, educators distinguish among the product, process, and progress learning criteria. (Guskey & Bailey, 2010)

The initial step in establishing a high-quality, standards-based grading system requires that teachers distinguish three types of learning criteria and related standards (Guskey, 1996, 2004):

- *Product* criteria focus on what students know and are able to do at a particular point in time. They relate to students' specific achievements or level of proficiency based on

culminating demonstrations of learning, such as final examinations; final reports, projects, exhibits, or portfolios; or other overall assessments of learning.

- *Process* criteria relate to what students did in reaching their current level of achievement and proficiency. They include elements such as effort, class behavior, and work habits. They also might include evidence from daily work, regular classroom quizzes, homework, class participation, or punctuality of assignments.

- *Progress* criteria consider how much students gain from their learning experiences. In other words, they focus on how far students have come, rather than where they are. (Guskey, 1996)

Grading students with disabilities

Although a wealth of research verifies the positive effects of including students with disabilities (Waldron, 1998), the process poses unique challenges for grading and reporting. Should the grades for these students be based on grade level standards, for example, or should grades somehow be adapted? Should the grades be based on achievement only, or should teachers also consider effort, progress made, or some other combination of factors?

For students whose education occurs primarily in special education classrooms, the special education teacher typically assigns most grades (Bursuck, Polloway, Plante, Epstein, Jayanthi, & McConeghy, 1996). But many educators are fearful and feel unprepared to work with students with disabilities in their clasrooms. (Kochhar, C., West, L. & Taymans, J., 2000) It should be also mentioned that most teachers receive little training or guidance on grading, especially as it relates to students with disabilities. (Rojewski, Pollard, & Meers, 1990)

But still it is common for teachers to be responsible for the instruction and evaluation of students with mild disabilities, learning, emotional, and behavioral challenges, and other needs that require specific attention, even if they do not receive additional funding, assistance, training, or professional development opportunities. Inclusive practices occur in regular classrooms and teachers meet the needs of more and more diverse student populations within general education classrooms, whether or not they are prepared.

Teachers who are poorly prepared to meet the needs of special students in an inclusive classroom poses concerns. (Bruns & Mogharreban, 2007)

Teachers sometimes view the task of assigning grades as time-consuming and unrelated to actual teaching. Problems often arise when teachers apply inconsistent standards and use subjective judgments to arrive at grades. Students and parents usually know little about the grading system used at their school and may have no clear, shared understanding of the purpose of grades. In fact, grades hold different meanings for each of us.

Grading students with disabilities poses additional dilemmas. Grading systems used in general education classes are usually ill-equipped for individualization to meet the needs of a particular student, and research has documented that special education students in general education classes are at risk of receiving low or failing grades. (Donohoe & Zigmond, 1990)

General and special educators often fail to collaborate effectively to coordinate the general grading system with the accommodations and modifications required under a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). Even when a classroom teacher wants to individualize a grading system for a student with a disability, the teacher often lacks knowledge of how to do it. Thus, many students with disabilities receive inaccurate and unfair grades that provide little meaningful information about their achievement. (Munk, D., D & Bursuck, D., W., 2003)

The IEP describes how the student learns, how the student best demonstrates that learning and what teachers and service providers will do to help the student learn more effectively. Developing an IEP requires assessing students in all areas related to the known disabilities, simultaneously considering ability to access the general curriculum, considering how the disability affects the student's learning, forming goals and objectives that correspond to the needs of the student, and choosing a placement in the least restrictive environment possible for the student. (La Salle, Tamika; Roach, Andrew; McGrath, Dawn, 2013)

To guide educators in the process of developing appropriate policies for grading students with disabilities, Jung and Guskey developed the Inclusive Grading Model. (Jung, 2009; Jung & Guskey, 2007).

This model, is designed to fit standards-based learning environments and meet the legal requirements for reporting on the progress of students who have IEPs. The five steps of the model include:

- establish clear standards for student learning that distinguish product, process, and progress goals;
- for each standard, determine if it needs to be adapted for the student;

- if adaptation is needed, determine if that adaptation requires accommodation or modification;
- if modification is required, develop an appropriate modified standard;
- assign a grade or mark based on the modified standard and note on the report card which standards have been modified.

Despite increased numbers of students with disabilities being included in general education classrooms for greater portions of the school day, little guidance has come from the special education community to address the challenge of grading included students. Lacking specific policies or recommendations, most general education teachers make informal, individual grading adaptations for such students. (Bursuck, Munk, & Olson, 1999)

Munk and Bursuck (2003) deem the following examples of grading adaptations effective:

- prioritize essential knowledge and related assignments;
- assess the processes or effort that the student uses to complete work and make that the basis for part of the grade;
- incorporate progress on IEP annual goals and/or objectives;
- base part of the grade on the amount of improvement shown in the area being measured;
- vary grading weights.

It is important that co-teachers determine adaptations prior to assigning grades. This allows the teachers to be objective when grading and to address issues of fairness and appropriateness of grading

Theoretically, these adaptations provide encouragement and opportunities for success. Evidence indicates, however, that such adaptations typically lead students to see grades not as an indication of their performance, but, instead, as a reflection of who they are. (Ring & Reetz, 2000). Furthermore, even with these adaptations, most students in special education continue to receive low passing grades, placing them at risk for low self-esteem and for dropping out of school. (Donahue & Zigmond, 1990)

Bauer and Brown (2001, p. 190) highlight the importance of assessment and accomodations for students with disabilities, and their grading in inclusive settings:

- the purpose of assessment is to help teachers gather information to facilitate decision-making.

- fair assessment allows every student to demonstrate what he or she can do.

- student learning can be assessed in a variety of ways.

- accommodations are designed so that students with disabilities can be included in general assessments.

- in state- and district-wide assessments, students with disabilities may participate in the standard testing administration offered to all students, use approved accommodations, or use alternate assessments to measure their progress.

But they also suggest that assessment is unfair if students are:

- not provided an equal opportunity to demonstrate what they know,

- judged on abilities and needs using biased assessments, or

- limited in their educational opportunities because of assessment information. (Bauer and Brown, 2001, p. 168-169)

Finally, to be both just and fair, grading practices for students with disabilities must:

- be consistent with school policy;

- communicate to families the performance of their children;

- reflect the theoretical orientation of the teachers involved;

- be consistent with the IEP established for the student (Christiansen & Vogel, 1998)

Therefore, students must be given opportunities to show what they know in a variety of ways. Assessment is probably the most important tool for special needs students. Assessments determine eligibility for programs and services, measure achievement, and focus new directions for instruction. (Weber, 1994)

Within inclusive classrooms, teachers are under increased pressure to demonstrate that their students are improving academically. Measures of accountability and large-scale assessments ask that teachers show that all of their students, the regular and the special needs, are learning. (Sindelar et al., 2006)

Conclusions

Inclusive environments are about more than just setting and delivery of services. They involve a philosophy of education in which professionals have a moral responsibility to educate every student, remove barriers that prevent full participation, and ensure that students reachtheir full potential. (Fewster, 2006)

There are myriad perspectives on grading students with disabilities in inclusive settings. These differing philosophies often conflict with one another and can make assessing student progress a tense, stressful process for all involved. For general and special educators who are collaborating and coteaching, a fair and acceptable grading system must be agreed-upon prior to grading. Above all, the grading system must be aligned with best practices, legal guidelines, and the individual needs of students participating in the inclusive setting. (Salend, 2005)

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