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Inclusion in Physical Education: Autism and Hearing Deficiencies

Focus:

I have selected two students from Mrs. Dalman's sixth grade homeroom class for this assignment. I will compare and contrast different teaching styles I will implement in order to keep both students fully involved in my class. One student, Erin, has severe autism and does not like physical education. The other student, Adam, is mainstreamed but has a hearing difficulty. I will see these students twice during the week and I will assess my abilities during my games unit where the students will be actively engaged in fleeing and dodging games. In other words, these students will participate in two lessons during the unit.

Description:

Up until now, Erin has been described to me by her homeroom teacher as having very little interest in participating in physical education and does not like physical activity. She often questions why she has to come to my class. Her homeroom teacher and the special education teacher in the building have expressed interest and concern regarding her participation in physical education. However, Erin has been engaged during floor hockey and will participate when the opportunity arises for her. Every time I look towards Erin, she is paying attention and participating by trying to control the hockey puck. She has been successful hitting the puck at times, but not at the level that other students are succeeding. If the puck comes directly at her, she is able to hit the puck in a general direction, although she does not actively seek out the puck to control it. She has two girls that help guide her through class and communicate with me how Erin can be a larger part of the class.

I have tried to engage Erin in the floor hockey activities we have done so far as well as other games I have conducted. By giving her more attention, she seems to want to be more active. There was one instance where Erin did not want to participate in the game Medic, which is similar to dodgeball, and stood near the wall the entire time. When I asked her why she was not participating, she responded by asking why she had to do it. Erin's helpers came to me during another class session and asked if Erin could be a captain because it was her birthday. Although I was not having captains during the day's activity, I purposely asked Erin about her birthday and how her day was going which led to a short conversation. The following day I saw her in the hall and again asked how her birthday went trying to show her that I care about events outside of the classroom. This seems to have had a positive effect on our relationship as a student and teacher. She is very friendly towards me which was a concern of mine because of her attitude towards physical education. Thus far she has answered my questions very thoughtfully and has also asked me questions in return.

Adam on the other hand has participated fully throughout the time that I have been in this building. Adam is one of the more athletic students in his class and proves

his ability in physical education. His hearing disability has yet to be a problem. He seems to be a leader among his peers as other students look to him for examples and guidance.

I had Adam's older brother earlier in the year at the Junior High and have formed a common connection with Adam because of this. We have been able to form a positive relationship that started with discussing how his brother and I were able to form a great relationship. Adam seems motivated and wants to participate at an above average level each class period. He volunteers to demonstrate and also set-up and put away equipment. Adam has even sought me out in the hallway to tell me about what his brother is doing at the Junior High.

Interestingly, there was an instance that involved both students. Adam and Erin were aligned for a face-off in floor hockey. I gave Adam a quick glance as to say to him to let Erin win, which he replied by saying "I know" and that I did not have to tell him. This was very reassuring for me as it could build Erin's confidence and also give her the satisfaction she needs in order to continue participation.

Interpretation:

I do not feel that Erin has had a positive experience in physical education in the past. It is sometimes very difficult for students with disabilities to adapt to a mainstream physical education class. Also, some physical educators struggle to include those students with disabilities. Students with autism like to have a very structured environment which may be the reason behind Erin's participation in floor hockey. During floor hockey, the structure of the class has been very similar each session. However, another reason for Erin's anxiety towards physical education could be the unpredictability and changing structure from moving from her homeroom class to the gymnasium (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007, p. 263.) I will need to understand this dynamic as I plan for my games unit in order to keep Erin involved.

One reason Erin may not like physical education could be because she does not understand the benefits of such activity because of her impairment. According to Turnbull, Turnbull, and Wehmeyer (2007), "individuals with autism do not understand that their own beliefs, desires, and intentions may differ from those of others" (as cited in Baron-Cohen, 2001; Baron-Cohen et al., 2002, p.261). Erin's negative attitude toward physical education may stem from this statement because she does not understand the benefits of physical activity like many other students do. Students with autism are not usually thought of as athletes or physically active because of them having trouble managing their fundamental movements. "Anxieties about managing their fundamental movements can be magnified by the additional expectation that they learn new skills" which could cause a problem for Erin (Notbohm, 2005, p. 17). Most educational help for these students comes in the form of core class help. Erin's Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) does not focus on any aspects of physical education; it mainly involves reading and writing.

Erin may not have previously been engaged in physical education. Like is stated previously, she may have been a student that was left to "just get by" in class as long as she was not disturbing any of the other students. Considering her IEP does not include physical education, her previous physical education teachers may not have considered giving her extra help or attention.

Erin's social interaction in class is limited to her two helpers the majority of the time. Many of the other students do not interact with Erin and she does not reach out to any other students. She may feel excluded in class, therefore, she may feel as if she should not excel. Many students with autism feel as if they do not have any friends. Erin is minimally verbal which is characterized by not being very social with other individuals. Erin has very rarely socialized with me unless I create an opportunity for her to interact. Susan Stokes describes communication and social skills among students with autism as "interdependent, the characteristics and features of autism regarding social relations contribute to the child's significant difficulty in using verbal language skills to effectively communicate" (p. 1). Erin does not have complete control over effective communication with her peers.

Taking Erin's Autism into account, she may not understand my instructions fully. She needs instruction to be clear and simple in order to fully understand.

One last interpretation why Erin does not like physical education is the fact that it is a loud and sometimes hostile environment. Ellen Notbohm (2005), explains that having "hyper-acute hearing can cause real, agonizing pain... [which] impacts language and social learning; what looks like laziness or noncompliance is in fact inability to filter and/or process ordinary, everyday sounds" (p. 10-11). I have noticed Erin covering her ears often in my class, which could mean that she has a type of hyper-acute hearing that causes problems.

Adam seems to have had a very positive experience in physical education as his abilities and attitude show. However, I need to continue to reinforce his positive behavior in order to keep him active and on-task. I also need to remember that he has a hearing difficulty although it has not yet presented itself in class.

Adam's physical abilities have allowed him to be successful in physical education. He has been able to accomplish tasks based on his natural ability. Adam should be engaged throughout each lesson based on these attributes.

However, Adam sometimes becomes complacent. I feel that he needs to be pushed a little harder than other students in order to improve. This could be difficult because many other students in the same class will not be pushed as hard as Adam.

Adam comes from a family that seems to be satisfied with being average. Adam does not seem to care about his grade in physical education and is satisfied with simply doing what I ask of him.

I need to remember Adam's hearing deficiency as well. He may not be putting in extra effort because he is not clearly hearing my instructions and expectations although this has yet to be a foreseen problem.

Definition of Stakes:

If the interpretations for Erin go unchecked, Erin could ultimately continue to dislike physical activity. As a physical educator, it is my goal to have my students enjoy physical activity and be active throughout their lifespan. Erin could feel physical activity is a social tool and considering her lack of social interaction, she could be forced further away from exercise. This could lead to other students not accepting Erin because she is not willing to participate which could also isolate her. I could also let Erin "slip through the cracks" as a teacher because I may not notice her participation. This all could come

full circle and reinforce Erin's predetermined negative attitude towards physical education and physical activity.

In order to combat this, Erin will need extra attention and support. I will need to communicate clearly with her helpers so they can help her understand. She will also need me to explain the games in a simple manner in order for her to understand my instruction easier. This is very important for her to understand the objective of each game in order for her to participate. She may not like some games which means that I need to find a way to motivate her to play. I could compare the game to other activities she may have done previously or other aspects of her life. I need to remember to keep directions and instructions simple for her and give her some extra feedback. I need to make physical education a positive experience for Erin so there is a possibility of her enjoying her time in the class. If I do not give Erin more attention, she likely could not want to participate and begin to question her being in class.

If Adam's hearing difficulty becomes a problem, I need to focus on being loud enough for him to hear when I give entire group instruction. I could also give him individual instruction. If I do not give Adam feedback, he may not participate as much as he has in class. He may feel as if I have forgotten about him being in class.

However, if I give Adam more attention than the rest of the class and push him too hard he may feel as if I'm singling him out. Considering that his family is satisfied with being average, this might turn Adam off to physical education. He may feel as if he does not need to be pushed and then ultimately give up.

Giving both students extra attention will take away from other students in the class. I need to teach everyone in the class, not just these two individuals. Even if I give both of these students more individual instruction and feedback, I still need to give individualized instruction to other students. Providing more time for Erin and Adam could create less time for the other students which means their performance could decrease. I need to create a balance between the two students described and the rest of the class. An alternative is to give small group instruction which includes the two students and other students in the class that may need similar help.

As far as my planning goes, I need to be very specific regarding the games that I plan to teach during the unit. If the games are complex, there needs to be a way to explain them in a simple manner for Erin's sake as well as other students in the class. I could relate the games to other activities that the students have done previously in physical education or other subject areas. The games need to be interesting and create motivation for both students to be active. I could also place Erin in a situation where she can be successful.

Alternatives:

As I begin to plan and teach the unit, I will not try to teach these two students better than any other student. I will however, use different strategies with both of the students. As I have mentioned above, Erin will need instruction simplified in order to better understand the games. I will also encourage her to participate and try to explain the reason why she should be participating. It is my goal for her to want to participate in physical education and also understand why physical education is important. I want her to change her opinion about the class and be excited to come to my class.

Considering Erin's need for simplified instruction, I could take an approach where I use pictures and concrete visual examples to help teach Erin. A lot of students with autism need "visual cuing, and it likely stems from the fact that many individuals with autism think in images, not words" (Notbohm, 2005, p. 52). This could allow Erin to visually see my expectations and the activities she is to perform, which could allow better understanding and participation. Of course, I would need to do this while the other students begin the activity in order to not single Erin out. I do not want other students to feel as if I am giving her preferential treatment or feel as if Erin is less of a person due to the fact that I am giving her this treatment.

Erin's two helpers are a great advantage to help her understand some of the specific details of my class, but this does not allow her to meet new friends in class. In order for Erin to socialize with other students, I could assign her to a group that includes one of her helpers as well as other students in the class. The other students need to be strong role-models for Erin and also be willing to help Erin achieve the goals set out in class. I could interact with the school special education teacher as well as her homeroom teacher to see which students would work best for Erin to socialize with. A possible way to include Erin is to use a peer buddy system, which is called "Links" within the DeWitt Public School system. This program "involves linking same-age peers with and without mental retardation in a wide array of activities, including those outside the classroom, and could be equally useful for students with autism" (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007, p. 272).

For me, I need to take a proactive approach when teaching Erin. I need to see potential problems before they happen and plan accordingly. Teaching students with autism takes a lot of planning and I need to take this into account in order to keep Erin active in class. With Adam, I do not need to focus on him as much as he will be able to follow directions and should be active throughout the session. I do however need to reinforce his positive behavior to keep him motivated.

Compared to Erin, I will simply give feedback to Adam that allows him to continue to participate. Considering Adam likes physical education, I will not need to give him extra attention in order for him to continue participation unless he needs to be pushed to improve. However, this is a gray area because I do not want to push him so hard where it leads to him not enjoying physical activity. Again, I will need to give him individual instructions if his hearing difficulty becomes a problem for him to understand group directions.

At the end of the unit, I want both students to be actively participating in class in an intrinsic manner. I want them to be physically active for the health benefits, not just because they have to be active in class. This will be very hard to accomplish in two class periods, but I want to lay a foundation for the rest of the school year.

I will continue to teach the class as I have been doing but I will help each of these students in different ways in order to help all of my students develop competency in the selected games. I need to teach everyone in the class, not just two specific individuals.

Evaluation:

As I began to teach the games unit to the class that both of these students are in, I kept in mind the strategies I would need to use in order for the students to benefit. It was very hard for me to focus a lot of attention on these two individuals as the other students

needed my attention as well. However, I was able to give individualized instruction at certain points of each lesson that I taught which really seemed to benefit both students described previously. In regards to Erin, I feel that this individualized instruction allowed her to feel a sense of belonging in the class. She may not understand all of the benefits of physical activity, but socially, she could feel more welcome and a larger part of the overall structure of the class. Instead of simply letting Erin “get by” in my class, I wanted to prove to her that she deserves to participate in class and that she too can be successful like the other students.

Out of the two students, I focused more attention on Erin because she needs more attention than Adam. Adam is able to perform without much extra attention whereas Erin needs more motivation from me. After I explained the lesson to the entire class and they began the activity, I asked Erin individually if she understood my directions. She replied that she did not, so I simplified the procedure for her. On this day, the students were to play a game called “Rat Race” where students (mice) transported cheese the length of the basketball court without being hit by dodgeballs being thrown by other students (cats). I simply explained that Erin was to run, grab the cheese, and keep running. She understood this, but then questioned what she needed to do if she was hit by a ball. I told her to sit down and hold the cheese high in the air while I demonstrated this activity myself. I was not positive that Erin understood these directions, but as class continued I noticed that she was actively participating and performing what I had described. Nonetheless, she was doing this without any help from her two class helpers.

Towards the end of class I asked Erin if she enjoyed the game. She smiled and said that she did, but also asked me when class would be over. I feel that she is beginning to like physical education, but I need to remember to motivate her by giving individualized attention. In order to have Erin become intrinsically motivated, I need to provide ways for her to enjoy the class in order to develop this type of motivation towards physical activity. I do not want to let her “slip through the cracks” as I know that she will most likely not be an elite athlete, but I want her to understand the health benefits behind exercise.

I was also able to notice Erin interacting with other students in her class other than her helpers. As I was walking the perimeter of the gymnasium observing the activity, Erin was talking and laughing with two students that I had not seen her talk with previously. One student was helping Erin understand the idea behind the activity while seemingly making it fun for her. This was great to see as her social interaction may help her enjoy physical education more. I feel that if she has more friends to perform the activities with, she may have a more positive attitude on what she is performing. On this particular day, Erin seemed to be very lighthearted and enjoyable. Maybe this was the reason for her increased socialization with other students.

The gymnasium was very loud with a lot of students at once during the Rat Race game. However, the noise level did not seem to bother Erin. I thought that this might be a problem initially and I kept an eye on her to see what would happen. It seemed as if she was more focused on what she had to do and was able to block out the auditory distractions. One specific instance I noticed was when Erin held her hands to her ears while she walked through the gymnasium. This was a warning to me that she might be uncomfortable and that she could decrease her participation as Notbohm (2005) suggests that sensory overload is a major trigger to meltdowns for students with autism (p. 79).

However, this was short lived as she continued walking to the end of the student line and then continued the activity when her turn arrived. Erin showed a lot of improvement throughout the course of the week and leads me to believe that she may be starting to understand why she needs to come to and participate in physical education class.

Adam, on the other hand, participated very well during both class periods during the week. I did not have to provide any extra motivation for him. I feel that he understands the benefits of physical activity and that he wants to be active in class. However, I did notice that he was not quite clear on some of my directions. During one class period, there were two classes participating in the gymnasium, roughly about 55 students. With a large amount of students at once, it is very hard to focus and hear everything I say. Adam looked confused about some directions, so I quickly asked him if he understood. I had to explain the game over to him so he understood. This was the first time I noticed any type of problem with his hearing deficiency.

I need to keep this in mind when giving future instruction. I cannot forget that Adam may have trouble hearing my directions. With only one class in the gym, it is much easier to make sure all of the students are quiet, but if I have two classes, I might need to check Adam's understanding in order for him to perform the activity correctly.

As far as the other students in the class, I made sure I gave them feedback and the same opportunities to learn as both Erin and Adam. However, most of the other students did not need as much individual feedback and were able to perform the activity based on my initial description. It seemed that all students had the opportunity to be active, and I was able to observe the students who were purposely avoiding the activity. I feel that it will not be a negative approach if I try to give Erin and Adam individual instruction in the future as long as I do it at a time where the other students will not suffer because of it.

I feel that I was able to teach both Erin and Adam better, although Adam did not need much help. Erin proved to me that she is capable of performing physical activity with a little extra help and guidance from me. I saw her smile and interact with other students which shows me that she was enjoying the experience. She was able to properly perform the activities which also displays that with proper instruction, she has the ability to be active in physical education. Overall, my teaching strategies were successful and I plan to continue using these strategies and maybe others in order for both students to have a positive experience in physical education.

References

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