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Leah Hagen

University of South Dakota, Leah.Sherman@coyotes.usd.edu

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Creating Inclusive Classroom Environments Through Education and Coaching

Student: Leah Hagen, MOT, OTR/L; Faculty Mentor: Shana Cerny, OTD, OTR/L, BCP



UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH DAKOTA
SCHOOL OF HEALTH SCIENCES

BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a United States (U.S.) federal law that requires all individuals with disabilities ages 3 through 21 to have access to free and appropriate public education within the least restrictive environment (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The literature supports educational inclusion as being beneficial for both students with disabilities and students without disabilities.

The results from a recent study by Cole et al. (2020) indicated that students with disabilities in general education inclusive settings for 80% or more of their time demonstrated significantly greater improvements in both math and reading compared to students with disabilities who were in special education settings more often (Cole et al., 2020). It has been found in other studies that individuals without disabilities also demonstrated higher academic performance when students with disabilities were present for instruction, compared to when students with disabilities received their academic instruction in a separate special education setting (Cole et al., 2004; Szumski et al., 2017).

Despite the laws regarding including students with disabilities and diverse learners in the classrooms and despite inclusive practices being thoroughly supported by research, general education teachers report feeling unprepared to teach and fully include students with disabilities. Research conducted by Brackenreed (2008) regarding teacher stressors about teaching students with special needs revealed the highest stressors most commonly reported by teachers included their self-perception of competency and having proper training, as well as being able to manage student behaviors. Furthermore, an investigation of teacher development needs found that the most commonly reported item teachers rated as feeling the lowest level of self-efficacy was with establishing an inclusive classroom environment (Parey, 2019).

Investment into the professional development needs of teachers in the area of inclusion is necessary to improve educational outcomes and the experiences of students with disabilities (Blanton et al., 2011). Occupational therapists (OTs) can utilize their knowledge and professional expertise to support teachers and their preparation for working with students with unique or special needs. The professional expertise with modifying and adapting activities and the environment enable OTs to support accessibility to academic and school-related tasks and activities; This background enables OTs to play a critical role with program implementation for supporting student inclusion (AOTA, 2016). Additionally, research supports the value of OT and teacher collaboration in supporting student needs (Kennedy & Stewart, 2011; Bose & Hinojosa, 2008).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Ecology of Human Performance (EHP): The EHP framework was developed by occupational therapy faculty members from the University of Kansas to emphasize the critical impact of the environment on an individual, their behavior, and on their task performance (Dunn et al., 1994). EHP was developed with concepts from occupational therapy as well as other social sciences, and incorporates ecological principles (Dunn et al., 1994). The main constructs of EHP include the person, context, task performance, and performance range (Dunn et al., 1994). All of these components are important to creating an optimal inclusive classroom environment. The EHP model consists five different intervention approaches: establish/restore, alter, adapt, prevent, and create (Dunn et al., 1994).

The content within this educational workshop provides recommendations on accommodations, modifications, interventions, and inclusive strategies that could better support and include all students during a given academic activity or task. Including a variety of teaching and intervention approaches is an essential component in creating a successful inclusive classroom environment.

Andragogy: Malcolm Knowles popularized the concept of Andragogy, in which he described as, “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Loeng, 2018, p.4). Six main assumptions about adult learning have been identified in the literature. The six assumptions of adult learning, according to Knowles (1984, as cited in Merriam & Bierema, 2014) are as follows:

- Adults are self-directed learners
- An adult’s life experiences are a valuable resource for their learning
- Adult learning is closely connected with the specific developmental tasks of an adult’s social role(s)
- Adult learning is more problem centered than subject centered
- Adults are typically motivated by intrinsic factors rather than extrinsic factors
- Adults need to know the purpose for their learning

These principles of adult learning were considered and embedded within the design of this educational workshop and the corresponding coaching sessions.

The GROW Model: The GROW model of coaching and mentoring is a well-known and effective method of promoting personal development (Thipatdee, 2019). The GROW model was originally created by John Whitmore, Graham Alexander, and Alan Fine in the 1980s (Nguyen, 2018). This model was later devised and published in 1992 by Whitmore in his book, *Coaching for Performance: The Principles and Practice of Coaching and Leadership* (Nguyen, 2018). The acronym GROW stands for four main components: G for goal-setting, R for Reality Checking, O for options, and W for Will (Thipatdee, 2019). The GROW technique involves the coach utilizing skilled questioning to guide an individual towards achieving their established goals (Narayananamy & Penney, 2014).

The devised GROW Model (Whitmore, 1992) was utilized to guide the coaching sessions throughout the project.

METHODS

Capstone Project Development

- An initial thorough literature review, theory application, a needs assessment, and frequent research on inclusive education and inclusive strategies throughout the project development process were utilized to inform the development of the educational workshop and follow-up coaching sessions
- A learning contract with learning objectives for the Capstone Project was created
- To represent achievement of the learning objectives, the following deliverables were completed: Andragogy and Pedagogy Best Practices Chart, Professional Development Certificate for a professional development course related to promoting inclusive strategies and educational inclusion, inclusive classroom observation logs, a written summary of the needs assessment results, proof of course proposal submission with course description, PowerPoint presentation handouts with presenter notes from the educational workshop, a written summary of the application of the EHP model to this project, logs and written summaries of coaching sessions, workshop handouts provided to workshop participants, a visual representation of pre-test and post-test scores from the workshop, and a reflection paper based on the results of the feedback surveys
- The capstone author frequently collaborated with her faculty mentor and expert site mentor throughout the process

Educational Workshop

- 12-hours of course content including eight hours of asynchronous pre-recorded modules and online discussion boards and four synchronous one-hour live sessions over Zoom
- The live sessions of the workshop were co-facilitated by the capstone project site mentor, an inclusive classroom teacher
- The pre-recorded modules, online discussion boards, resources, Zoom links for live sessions, and additional course information were posted in an online course on the course management system platform, Canvas
- Asynchronous and synchronous learning components covered the following topics: Introduction to inclusion, accommodations and modifications, assistive technology, supporting student physical needs, supporting student academic and learning needs, supporting student sensory needs, supporting student social, emotional, and behavioral needs, virtual inclusion, empowering students, and creating inclusive classroom environments
- 15 individuals from the same Minnesota school district participated in the workshop including nine general education teachers, three special education teachers, two special education coordinators, and one behavioral analyst
- A pre-test was conducted electronically prior to the start of the workshop and a post-test was conducted electronically following the completion of the workshop to assess the effectiveness of the workshop for participants with learning the content and meeting the learning objectives, as well as fulfilling the main purpose set forth for the workshop
- An electronic feedback survey was provided to workshop participants to gather feedback regarding instructor performance and preparedness, value and effectiveness of workshop, workshop content, and design and organization of the workshop
- Participants were provided with the resource called the *Inclusive Classroom Checklist*, created by the author of this capstone, which included guiding questions and inclusive strategies to meet the various student needs covered throughout the course in order to support application of learning

Coaching Sessions

- Four participants from the workshop (four general education teachers) also participated in the optional corresponding coaching sessions focused on creating an inclusive classroom environment
- Each participant completed an initial 30-minute coaching session and a 30-minute follow-up session two weeks later
- Coaching sessions were structured through the use of the Coaching Log form developed from concepts of the GROW Model (Whitmore, 1992)
- Participants created a goal related to a specific student need area from the workshop, and an action plan to support that need area in their classroom with inclusive strategies or methods
- Participants completed an electronic feedback survey to gather input from participants related to effectiveness and preparedness of the coach in supporting the participants with developing and making progress towards their goal, length of time for the initial and follow-up coaching sessions, the structure of the coaching sessions (with use of the Coaching Log form), and effectiveness and value of the coaching sessions overall

RESULTS & CONCLUSIONS

Educational Workshop

Pre-test and Post-test Score Comparison

- The pre-test scores ranged from 16 to 24 out of 30 points
 - The mean of the pre-test dataset was 20.27 out of 30 and the median of the pre-test dataset was 20 out of 30 points
- The post-test scores ranged from 22 to 27 out of 30 points
 - The mean of the post-test dataset was 24.07 out of 30 points and the median of the post-test dataset was 24 out of 30 points
- The average change in score for a participant from the pre-test to the post-test was an increase of 3.8 points
- Out of the 15 total participants, 13 participants showed an improvement from the pre-test to post-test and two participants showed a decrease of one point from pre-test to post-test

Feedback Survey Results

- 100% response rate (All 15 workshop participants completed the educational workshop feedback survey)
- Strengths based on feedback: Learning objectives met for workshop participants, course content included practical strategies, course content was meaningful to participants and their capacity working with students, workshop format (asynchronous and synchronous learning was beneficial to participants learning styles and/or schedules, the workshop was organized and easily accessible, asynchronous components of workshop prepared participants for synchronous components, time provided for Zoom breakout rooms for discussion during live sessions was appropriate, workshop instructor was knowledgeable about educational inclusion, workshop instructor provided valuable responses on online discussion board, workshop instructor was prepared to facilitate the workshop, the workshop was valuable based on time invested, and all participants reported that they planned to implement at least one new strategy learning during the course in the following three months
- Areas of growth based on feedback: Synchronous sessions could have been more engaging

Coaching Sessions

- During the follow-up coaching sessions, all participants made progress towards their goal related to creating an inclusive classroom environment, developed during the initial coaching session

Feedback Survey Results

- 75% response rate (3 out of 4 participants completed the coaching session feedback survey)
- All respondents reported the coach appeared knowledgeable and prepared to support them in creating an inclusive classroom environment
- All respondents reported the coach provided them with guidance and resources to support them in achieving their goal
- All respondents reported the coaching sessions added value to their role in supporting students and creating an inclusive classroom environment
- All respondents reported the initial and follow-up coaching sessions were an appropriate length of time based on the purpose for each session
- All respondents reported they would recommend these coaching sessions to their colleagues
- 2 of 3 participants reported the GROW Coaching Log form helped structure the coaching sessions and 1 participant reported they felt “neutral” about this statement

Capstone Project Evaluation

- All capstone learning objectives were met through completion of learning activities and deliverables from the learning contract
- The capstone author was knowledgeable and prepared to facilitate the educational workshop and the corresponding coaching sessions
- Participants gained an adequate amount of knowledge about educational inclusion as a result of participation in the educational workshop
- Participants learned practical inclusive strategies during the educational workshop that they planned to implement with their students
- The coaching sessions were valuable to participants and assisted participants in application of knowledge learned during the workshop
- If this workshop is conducted again in the future, the capstone author should incorporate more engaging activities to apply content from the course, such as through incorporating case-based scenarios or generating additional discussion questions based on the content for the Zoom breakout room discussions
- The Coaching Log form developed through this project based on principles of the revised GROW Model (Whitmore, 1992) should continue to be utilized to structure coaching sessions in the future

Conclusion

- An educational workshop for teachers and school staff that incorporates synchronous and asynchronous learning components has shown to be an effective design in educating others on creating inclusive classroom environments
- Incorporating follow-up coaching sessions can further support the implementation of inclusive strategies in classrooms

OT IMPLICATIONS

Practice & Education

- OTs have a unique educational background and perspective for which to view, promote, and educate on inclusive environments. School-based OTs are prepared to educate and collaborate with teachers and school staff on practices and strategies that can promote an inclusive classroom environment and support a variety of student needs.
- As creating the most optimal inclusive classroom environment requires collaboration between disciplines and teamwork, it is recommended that instructors of professional development and educational courses on inclusion consider a co-facilitator with a different perspective and professional background to incorporate a more comprehensive approach.

Research

- More current research on inclusive practices in schools is needed and should focus on the implementation and effectiveness of practical and realistic inclusive practices that can be implemented in classrooms.
- The results of this combined educational workshop which incorporated both synchronous and asynchronous learning components indicated successful outcomes for participants, but it would be beneficial to have more research conducted to compare the effectiveness of this workshop design to a workshop that is either all synchronous (all virtual or all in-person) or all asynchronous (all online). Research on the most effective workshop design for participants could inform future workshops to foster the best possible course outcomes.
- The combination of participating in both the educational workshop and the coaching sessions compared to participating in the educational workshop alone may lead to more immediate and effective application of inclusive strategies. Future research should be conducted to determine differences in efficacy with application of content and strategies learned during the workshop for participants who participate in both the workshop and the coaching sessions compared to those that just participated in the educational workshop.

Advocacy

- As indicated in the research, the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom has been associated with numerous positive outcomes for students. Continuing to promote inclusive strategies and advocate for educational inclusion can make a significant difference in the outcomes and future for not just children with disabilities, but for all children.

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