Social studies instruction for students with mild disabilities: An (updated) progress report

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A B S T R A C T

Over the past two decades, there has been a marked increase in the number of students with mild disabilities who receive social studies instruction in the general education classroom. This research uses the seminal 1994 Passe and Beattie study as a comparative referent to examine current instructional strategies used to teach such students. The current study sought to answer: What instructional practices do contemporary general educators use to teach social studies to students with disabilities? And have these practices changed in twenty-years? Comparative and comparison results are provided with suggestions to differentiate social studies instruction to meet the learning needs of students with mild disabilities.

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Introduction

During the last several decades, federal legislation has impacted the field of special education ushering in significant changes in the areas of identification practices and resultant services for students with disabilities. Arguably the most important and sweeping piece of federal legislation was the 1975 passage of the Education of the Handicapped Act (P.L. 94–142) which mandated that students with disabilities be provided a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. The result was a growing philosophical and practice-based movement in which students with disabilities were increasingly educated with their non-disabled peers in general education settings.

Since the implementation of P.L. 94–142, the number of students with mild disabilities who access the general education curriculum has continued to increase. Currently, roughly 87% of students with mild disabilities receive the majority of instruction in the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). This poses major challenges for content-area educators—including social studies—who are now responsible for the academic instruction of all students, including students with mild disabilities.

The broad category of mild disabilities typically comprises learning disabilities, emotional or behavior disorders, and intellectual disabilities, while some authors also include communication disorders and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder in addition to the above mentioned disability categories (Steele, 2007; Taylor & Larson, 2000). Learners with mild disabilities comprise the largest group of students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in the age category of 6 through 21 (U.S. Department of Education, 2013) and have the highest prevalence rates in schools. Roughly
three-quarters of all school-aged students receiving special education services are learners with mild disabilities (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2014). Students with mild disabilities typically exhibit the following characteristics:

- Experience deficits in updating and monitoring working memory processes, inhibition of responses, shifting between tasks or mental sets (Danielsson, Henry, Messer, & Ronnberg, 2012; Kaufman, 2010); planning, organizing, prioritizing, shifting strategies, and self-monitoring (Meltzer, 2007; Meltzer & Krishnan, 2007).
- Demonstrate limited knowledge of concepts (Prater, 2007).
- Possess difficulties with both short-term and long-term memory (Carter, Prater, & Dyches, 2008; Van der Molen, Van Luit, Jongmans, & Van der Molen, 2007, 2009) and struggle with developing and using strategies to store and retrieve information and solve problems (Prater, 2007).
- Struggle with maintaining on-task behaviors, planning and directing goal-directed actions, following instructions, completing assignments, and organizing tasks (Carter et al., 2008; Harris, Reidy, & Graham, 2004; Kaufman, 2010; Prater, 2007).
- Exhibit difficulties with decoding, text comprehension and composition, writing mechanics (Gajria, Jitendra, Sood, & Sacks, 2007; Graham, Harris, & Larsen, 2001; Jitendra, Hoppes, & Xin, 2000; Cain, Oakhill, & Bryant, 2004; Stagliano & Boon, 2009; Williams, 2005), math facts, rules, and concepts, (Carter et al., 2008; Geary, 2004; Montague, Enders, & Dietz, 2011; Swanson & Sachse-Lee, 2001).
- Struggle with building and maintaining social relationships, understanding and applying social rules, solving problems, problems with self-competence (i.e., self-knowledge, self-evaluation, sense of personal control) (Carter et al., 2008; Jones, 2000; Stein & Krishnan, 2007). Such issues often manifest through low motivation, decreased engagement with school, and increased retention and drop-out rates (Biederman et al., 2004; Carter et al., 2008; Reschly & Christenson, 2006).

Select characteristics have impacted student achievement in the social studies classroom, particularly in the areas of reading and writing (De La Paz, Morales, & Winston, 2007; Hughes & Parker-Katz, 2013; Ciullo, Falcomata, & Vaughn, 2015). Considering that in social studies classroom students are routinely exposed to significant amounts of information and tasks that require efficient reading and writing skills, lack of mastery in these areas place students with mild disabilities at a greater risk for academic failure (Bulgren, Graner, & Deshler, 2013).

Early research into the relationship between social studies and students with mild learning disabilities (Curtis, 1982; Guerian, 1992; Hickey & Braun, 1990; Ochoa & Schuster, 1980) was both limited and limiting and offered only a handful of strategies to consider when designing responsive and engaging instruction for all students. Though well intentioned and certainly informative, such research provided instructional suggestions rather than evidence-based practices. Yet more importantly, early research failed to address the rise of inclusive practices and the concomitant effect it had on social studies instructional design and delivery. Simply, the research failed to ask: How do general educators adapt their instructional practices to meet the learning needs of students with mild disabilities in the inclusive social studies classroom? This seminal question would be answered by a groundbreaking research study that would benchmark the relationship between social studies instruction and students with mild disabilities.

In 1994, Jeff Passe and John Beattie published “Social Studies Instruction for Students with Mild Disabilities” in the highly respected, peer-reviewed journal Remedial and Special Education. The authors argued that many of the instructional practices used to teach social studies, namely the overreliance on the textbook and the lecture, reading, group discussion approach, likely do not meet the learning needs of students with mild disabilities. As many students with mild disabilities struggle with processing the often overwhelming amount of verbal information—presented via lecture—note-taking and organization of content become problematic. The authors noted that the social studies curriculum should include more problem-solving opportunities for all students, though such inquiry-based opportunities are often felt inappropriate for students with mild disabilities. Passe and Beattie lamented that “the nature of the social studies classroom and the orientation of the social studies teachers tend to be more focused on delivering the curriculum content than on the needs of the student” (1994, p. 288). The premise of their research was to ascertain, in light of the nascent rise of inclusive practices, how K-12 social studies educators modify instruction to address the unique learning needs of students with mild disabilities. The findings from their national survey were partitioned into four meta-categories: classroom adaptations; instructional constraints or limitations; the comparative performance of students with mild disabilities in the social studies classroom; and the importance, or emphasis placed upon social studies for students with mild disabilities.

Premised on the survey and interview results, Passe and Beattie (1994) concluded that the most commonly used classroom adaptation to address the learning needs of students with mild disabilities was peer tutoring. Such tutoring was often informal and relied on the teacher asking a neighboring student to assist the student with mild disabilities. Assistance typically consisted of reviewing previously taught content. Teachers interviewed felt that the peer tutoring of (review) content positively impacted the academic performance of students with mild disabilities.

Respondents identified structured or special seating arrangements as another frequent accommodation made for students with mild disabilities in the social studies classroom. Here, students with mild disabilities were purposefully placed near “helpful” peers as to promote and enhance positive social interactions.

In an effort to make the social studies content easier and, hence, more accessible to students with mild disabilities, participant teachers provided different assignments. Such modifications included the elimination of difficult questions (typically found at the end of the chapter), reducing the amount of writing required in answering select questions and, in
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