

Explicit Instruction for Students with Special Learning Needs

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Statement of the Problem

Students with special learning needs are increasingly included in regular classes and are often taught by teachers without expertise in special education. Instructional strategies used in typical classrooms are often based on constructivist views of learning. In these approaches the teacher's role is to facilitate rather than to instruct: sometimes expressed as "the guide on the side rather than the sage on the stage". Proponents of constructivist approaches argue that by constructing their own knowledge as a result of activity based learning and discussion with peers, students will gain a deeper understanding than if explicitly taught by the teacher. The application of such principles to the teaching of basic skills and cognitive strategies for children with special needs is of concern.

Proposed Solution/ Intervention

Students with special needs typically need additional learning support to access the curriculum. Explicit instruction involves making clear to students what they are to learn and how they will demonstrate their learning, direct teaching of basic skills or strategies in small steps, clear presentation of new concepts, guided and independent practice, active engagement of students, constant monitoring of student performance and intensive feedback.

The theoretical rationale – how does it work?

Explicit teaching draws on the research literature about how humans learn and on empirical research about the effects of differing teaching approaches. It focuses on the role of

the teacher in providing explicit guidance to students and the use of observable changes in student performance to keep track of student learning.

What does the research say? What is the evidence for its efficacy?

Anecdotal and informal, qualitative reports claim some benefit for child-centred approaches for students with special education needs. There are, however, very few methodologically sound empirical studies supporting the use of constructivist approaches to instruction for students with special needs, particularly in conditions that approximate regular classrooms. In contrast, there is a large research base supporting overt, explicit, teacher directed approaches to instruction. Teacher directed approaches are also likely to be effective for typically developing students and thus are appropriate for inclusive classrooms.

Conclusions

There is very limited evidence to support the use of constructivist approaches for students with special needs and the approach is clearly at odds with what *is* known about effective instruction for such students in basic skill areas. On the other hand, there is clear and convincing evidence for explicit teaching approaches to instruction.

The MUSEC Verdict:

Recommended

Key references may be found at:
http://www.musec.mq.edu.au/co_brief.aspx

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