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Accommodating Students with Severe Disabilities in Regular Physical Education:

Extending Traditional Skill Stations

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Traditional Skill Stations

The current trend in special education is to place most all children, including those with severe disabilities, not only in regular schools but to fully integrate them in all regular education activities (Giangreco & Putnam, 1991; Stainback & Stainback, 1990). As a direct result of this trend, ever increasing numbers of students with disabilities are being placed in regular physical education (Aufsesser, 1991; Grosse, 1991). While the debate continues as to appropriateness of integrating all students with disabilities into regular physical education (cf. Grosse, 1991; Lavay & DePaepe, 1987), the reality is that many physical educators are being asked or told to accept students with disabilities into their regular physical education programs. The challenge for these regular physical educators, as well as consultants who provide services to regular physical educators, is to provide a safe, appropriate, individualized physical education program for these special students, while including them within the regular curriculum. In addition, regular physical educators must continue to provide appropriate and challenging activities to students without disabilities.

One method for accommodating students with a variety of abilities in regular physical education is through *skill stations*. Use of skill stations is by no means new. Skill stations have often been recommended for individualizing regular elementary and secondary school physical education programs (Zakrajsek & Carnes, 1986). In traditional skill stations, several stations (number will vary depending on class size) can be set up around a theme (e.g., basketball or balance skills). Small groups of three to five students are then assigned to a station to work on a particular skill (e.g., dribbling in basketball or beam work in a balance unit). Each station consists of various tasks and challenges, usually listed hierarchically along a developmental continuum. Each student chooses a task or has a task chosen along the continuum that is challenging, yet at a level that affords him/her some success. Once criteria are met at one level, the student moves to the next level on the continuum. After 5-7 minutes at one station, the group rotates to the next station until each group rotates through all stations. This approach allows physical educators to organize the environment so all students are actively

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practicing skills at individually challenging yet achievable levels. Furthermore, station activities give teachers opportunities to move from station to station to reinforce skills and assist individual students. Such an approach (with assistance of teacher assistants or peer tutors as needed) easily accommodates the variety of skill levels normally seen in a regular physical education class, as well as students with more mild learning disabilities and mild mental retardation.

A problem with the scope of traditional skill stations is that they often do not meet needs of students with severe disabilities. Skill levels of students with severe disabilities are often well below the lowest levels on the continuum, and progress these students make in a particular skill is often painfully slow. In addition, some students have physical disabilities that preclude them from performing the skill using traditional methods (e.g., a student with severe spastic

diplegic cerebral palsy who has very limited range of motion in all joints or one with muscular dystrophy who is extremely weak). Slow progress and need to use different methods to accomplish motor skills are often cited as reasons for excluding such students from participating in regular physical education (Dunn & Craft, 1985; Grosse, 1991). Again, it is not the purpose of this article to question whether or not students with severe disabilities should be placed in regular physical education. The present reality in many school districts is that students with disabilities, including students with severe disabilities (those who are cog-nitively aware) want to participate in the same physical education activities as their peers. The question then is how does a regular physical educator who is asked to serve students with disabilities in regular physical education class implement a program that accommodates needs of students with and without disabilities?

Extending Traditional Skill Stations

One way of accommodating needs of students with severe disabilities is to extend the scope of traditional skill stations. An extended skill station expands on a traditional one by (a) extending the traditional skill continuum to accommodate students with low skill levels, (b) providing smaller increments and levels to chart slower progress, and (c) providing alternative movement patterns and strategies for students with physical disabilities who cannot perform the activity using traditional methods. In essence, extending the skill station helps students perform chronologically-age-appropriate activities in ways that highlight their individual strengths and abilities.

Extending a skill station involves listing skills hierarchically along a developmental continuum. However, the continuum begins at a lower level and has smaller increments between levels to accommodate students with severe disabilities. In addition, alternative ways to accomplish the goal of an activity are incorporated into the continuum for students who cannot perform the skill using traditional techniques. In the later case, the goal of the task may remain the same, but how a student reaches that goal varies depending on his/her particular abilities. For example, shooting a basketball into a basket might be the objective for one of the basketball stations. A student with cerebral palsy might not be able to shoot

Table 1
Extended Skill Station for Dribbling a Basketball

- _____ (name):
1. _____ touches ball with hand/head/stick when ball is placed on lap tray.
 2. _____ holds ball on lap tray.
 3. _____ holds ball on lap tray while student's wheelchair is pushed around gym.
 4. _____ pushes ball off lap tray.
 5. _____ picks up ball and drops ball to floor.
 6. _____ drops ball to floor then reaches down to touch ball before it bounces 3x.
 7. _____ drops ball to floor then reaches down to touch ball before it bounces 2x.
 8. _____ drops ball to floor then reaches down to touch ball before it bounces 1x.
 9. _____ pushes ball (actually attempts to dribble rather than drop ball) to floor with two hands so that ball bounces up into the air to approximately waist height.
 10. _____ pushes ball to floor with two hands two consecutive times.
 11. _____ pushes ball to floor with two hands three consecutive times.
 12. _____ dribbles ball to floor with one hand two consecutive times.
 13. _____ dribbles ball to floor with one hand three consecutive times.
 14. _____ dribbles ball to floor with one hand five consecutive times.
 15. _____ dribbles ball up and down repeatedly with one hand.
 16. _____ dribbles ball up and down repeatedly with one hand while pushing wheelchair forward with other hand.
 17. _____ dribbles ball while standing still for 10 seconds.
 18. _____ dribbles ball while standing still for 20 seconds.
 19. _____ dribbles ball while walking forward slowly.

(only steps 20 through 31 would be included in a traditional dribbling hierarchy)

20. _____ dribbles ball while walking forward at normal walking speed.
21. _____ dribbles ball while walking forward quickly.
22. _____ dribbles ball with dominant hand while jogging forward.
23. _____ dribbles ball with dominant hand while running forward.
24. _____ dribbles ball with non-dominant hand while walking forward.
25. _____ dribbles ball with non-dominant hand while jogging forward.
26. _____ dribbles ball with non-dominant hand while running forward.
27. _____ dribbles ball with either hand while weaving through cones.
28. _____ dribbles ball using a crossover dribble while weaving through cones.
29. _____ dribbles ball with either hand while moving in a variety of directions.
30. _____ dribbles and protects ball while guarded by opponent going at 3/4 speed.
31. _____ dribbles and protects ball while guarded by opponent going at full speed.

Cue Key (prompts can be given by physical educator, teacher assistant, or peer tutor):

l	independent	t	touch prompt
in	indirect cue	pp	partial physical assistance
v	verbal cue	p	physical assistance (student actively participating)
g	gestural cue	p+	physical assistance (student passively participating)
m	model	p-	physical assistance (student fighting assistance)

Performance Key

- + student performs skill 4/5 trials.
- +/- student performs skill, but not 4/5 trials.
- student does not perform skill.

"...alternative ways to accomplish the goal of an activity are incorporated into the continuum for students who cannot perform the skill using traditional techniques."

or even hold a basketball, but this student would like to participate at this skill station with peers. For this student, shooting might involve pushing a basketball off a lap tray into a box on the floor or using an adapted basketball device which, when activated by a switch, shoots a ball into a basket. Even though the student is using a technique that is quite different than the technique used by nondisabled students, the goal is the same—to shoot a ball into a basket. Thus, the student is working on a chronologically-age-appropriate activity in an integrated environment without affecting skill development of nondisabled peers. (All students work on shooting at their own levels). Moreover, the student with cerebral palsy is working on other skills that are personally beneficial (e.g., head control, focusing on objects, following verbal directions, moving hand to accomplish a task), functional (this student will use this method of shooting when the class begins to play basketball games; activating switches can be used for recreation/leisure), and individualized to meet his/her unique needs. An example of an extended skill station for dribbling a basketball is presented in Table 1.

When examining the extended skill station, note the addition of alternative methods designed specifically for students who cannot dribble a basketball using the traditional method. Alternative methods are provided on the continuum so that these students (e.g., students with physical disabilities) can still be successful. Also note that the continuum has many more steps than traditional skill hierarchies to detect smaller increments in progress. In addition to more steps, small increments in progress can be charted by using the *cue key*. The cue key lists varying amounts of assistance a student needs to perform a task (assistance which can be provided by a paraprofessional or a peer tutor¹). Progress can be charted by recording changes in levels of assistance a particular student needs. For example, a student with severe disabilities might perform an activity with **vpp** (verbal and partial physical cues) the first few trials, but may quickly advance to **vg** (verbal and gestural cues). This student has made progress even though he/she may not have actually progressed according to the skill continuum. Finally, notice that extending the skill station continues to provide appropriate and challenging activities to students without disabilities. Even highly skilled students will find demanding activities at the upper end of the continuum. The only difference is that extending the skill station provides a means by which students with severe disabilities can be successfully included in chronologically-age-appropriate activities with nondisabled peers.

Summary

Students with disabilities, including students with severe disabilities, are being placed in regular physical education environments, and regular physical educators are being asked to provide appropriate programs for these students. One method outlined in this article is extending traditional skill stations that

¹If peer tutors are to be used, it is recommended that they be recruited from study hall periods rather than physical education classes. If peer tutors are recruited from physical education classes, they should be rotated on a regular basis so they do not miss out on their own physical education experiences.

have been used successfully to include a variety of students in regular physical education (Kasser & Block, 1991; Passentino & Cranfield, 1991; and Paciorek & Block, in press, for specific examples of how such modifications have been successfully implemented). There are many benefits to extending traditional skill stations. First, the class is organized so that each student's practice time and motivation are maximized. Students stay at each station for only short periods of time (5-7 minutes), and during this period they can work intensely on a particular skill. Secondly, each student works on skills at his/her own level and within bounds of his/her abilities. Students with disabilities participate at their levels using methods that accommodate their abilities, while students without disabilities work on skills at their own levels. No student has to conform to the majority. Thirdly, students with disabilities are able to work on chronologically-age-appropriate activities with their classmates who have no disabilities. Such a setting may also provide opportunities for students with disabilities to learn more appropriate social skills, and it may also help students without disabilities learn more about unique abilities of their classmates who have disabilities (Snell & Eichner, 1989). When confronted with the task of including students with severe disabilities in regular physical education, extending traditional skill stations is one method worth consideration.

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