

Teaching the Self-Contained Adapted Physical Education Class

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Each student has unique needs and skills that should be addressed individually.

Many students with moderate to severe physical or intellectual disabilities are placed in self-contained classes for their school day. These self-contained classes are known as functional skills class, community-based instruction, or simply the class for students with moderate to severe disabilities (Beirne-Smith, Patton, & Kim, 2006). In many cases these students are not included in general physical education programs, and they receive their adapted physical education (APE) only with peers from their self-contained class. In other words, the self-contained class comes to the gym as a group to receive APE. These self-contained APE classes are taught by the school district's APE specialist, the school's general physical education (GPE) teacher, or the self-contained special education classroom teacher.

Many school districts do not employ adapted physical educators, and as a result the GPE teacher is usually the person who conducts the self-contained APE class. Unfortunately, research has shown that most GPE teachers receive very little preservice training and hands-on experience in APE in general and specifically in conducting a self-contained APE class (Chandler & Greene, 1995; Hardin, 2005; Hodge & Jansma, 2000). As a result, GPE teachers may not feel adequately prepared to organize and conduct a self-contained APE class in their school (Rust & Sinelnikov, 2010). The purpose of this article is to provide information to GPE teachers on how to conduct a self-contained APE class. The article begins with an example of a traditional model for a self-contained APE class, where all students work on the same goals using basically the same equipment and activities. This is then contrasted with an alternative model that corresponds to the individualized education program (IEP), in which students work on individually prescribed goals and objectives.

Traditional Model

Most GPE teachers have relatively homogeneous groups of students in their classes, with each class typically composed of students from one grade. While there certainly are going to be individual differences between students in a given class, for the most part it is reasonable to present the same curricular content to everyone in class, such as a throwing lesson, a lesson focusing on lead-up skills for volleyball, or a lesson teaching various dances. This thematic approach to teaching is promoted in many GPE texts (e.g., Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 2009; Pangrazi & Beighle, 2009). General physical education teachers who are asked to teach a self-contained APE class may assume that the self-contained APE class is similar to their general classes in terms

of presenting the same lesson and activities to all students in the class. For example, Jean, a general physical education teacher in a large suburban high school, has been given the task of organizing and teaching the self-contained APE class in her school. This class comprises eight students ages 14 to 19, with autism, intellectual disabilities, and multiple disabilities. All the students in Jean's class are around the same age (i.e., all are in high school) and have similar educational needs (i.e., functional rather than academic programming). As a result, Jean decides that she will have all students do the same activities with the same equipment and the same standards for achievement. Jean organizes her class around two themes—physical fitness and a lifetime sport such as bowling or soccer. The class begins with students walking or running three laps around the gym, followed by stretches and strength activities. The warm-up fitness activities take about 10 minutes. Warm-ups are followed by the students practicing bowling. Sometimes, each student has a ball, a set of pins, and a peer tutor who sets up the pins. At other times Jean partners her students, with one student bowling and the other student setting up the pins. When Jean created a soccer unit, her students first passed a ball back and forth with a partner, then took turns shooting a ball into a goal, and then ended the class with a modified game of soccer using several beach balls at once so students would have multiple turns.

The program described above helps all students in the class to work on physical fitness goals and develop skills needed to participate in a lifetime leisure activity (bowling) or sport (soccer). However, it does not provide the individualization needed by many of the students in the program. A closer look at Jean's class reveals that each student presents unique skills and challenges. Three students in her class have autism. One of them can talk and read and is highly compliant, but is very overweight; another is also overweight and not very motivated to move, but has good motor skills; and a third, who is hyperactive and unfocused, has no verbal skills, but is very physically fit. Three other students in the class have intellectual disabilities, including one student with Down syndrome who is overweight and often refuses to participate in physical activities, one who has some fitness issues but has pretty good sport skills, and one whose parents want him to learn how to do some individual lifetime leisure sports such as bowling and golf as opposed to team sports. Finally, Jean has a student with severe, multiple disabilities who has very little voluntary movement, as well as a severe intellectual disability. Clearly, each student in this self-contained class presents unique abilities and challenges for Jean. Has the program she created truly accommodated each student's unique needs? For example, are three laps enough for students in Jean's class who have good fitness, or are three laps too much for her students who struggle to walk even one lap? What about the choice of bowling and soccer? Is bowling appropriate for all students in the class? Is it possible that a student with severe autism who has a strong dislike for loud noises may get quite upset when his

teacher or parents try to take him to the bowling alley? The same may be true for soccer. One parent already expressed her preference for individual rather than team sports. Is soccer appropriate for the student with severe, multiple disabilities who has very limited motor control and may never be able to play soccer, even when modified?

Alternative to the Traditional Model

If a single activity or curriculum is not always appropriate for self-contained classes, then what is appropriate? The most appropriate approach to conducting a self-contained APE class is to use an individual-focused approach in which each student works on individually prescribed goals and objectives rather than all students working on the same goals and objectives (unless having all students work on the same goals is deemed appropriate). This individually focused approach follows the recommendation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), that all students with disabilities who qualify for special education services have an IEP. This IEP should be designed based on each student's individual needs. In other words, all students with autism should not necessarily have the same goals, nor should all students with Down syndrome. And as noted earlier, it is unlikely that all students in a self-contained class will need to work on the same goals at the same level all of the time. Goals should be determined individually, based on each student's abilities, needs, and interests (Auxter, Pyfer, Zittel, & Roth, 2010; Bateman & Linden, 2006; Short, 2005). The result of adhering to an individualized approach is that each student will have different goals. One or two students might be working on soccer and cardiovascular fitness goals, one or two others might be working on T-ball and strength goals, and one or two others might have basketball and bowling goals. Furthermore, two students who have the same goals might be at different skill levels. For example, one student's benchmarks (targets for improvement) in basketball might be to stand in place and dribble five times using his finger pads rather than slapping the ball. Another student with basketball as her goal might have benchmarks of dribbling while walking forward and keeping the ball at waist level. The key is that individualization should be a part of the process, even for students with goals in similar areas.

While the idea of providing an individualized approach to the self-contained APE class makes sense theoretically, it is difficult to envision how such a program works. The following provides a framework for how such a program can be implemented. It is important to note that running an individualized program requires adequate personnel support in the form of teacher assistants, volunteers, peer tutors, and even higher-functioning students with disabilities helping lower-functioning students. Research shows that peers can provide meaningful support to students with severe disabilities in a physical education setting (Block et al., 2001; Klavina & Block, 2008). However, peer tutors in particular may need to go through a training program to learn about how to work with the students with disabilities in the class

(see Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2010, for information on recruiting and training peer tutors).

Deciding What to Teach Each Student

Critical information that can be used to determine what to teach each student includes (1) the parents' interests, (2) the student's interests, (3) what is popular and available in the community, and (4) the student's assessed abilities, needs, and target goals (Block, 2007; Kelly & Melograno, 2004; Rainforth & York-Barr, 1997). First, ask each student's parents what they would like their son or daughter to work on in physical education (see Block, 2007, for an example of a simple form to send home to parents to get their feedback on what to teach). Parents should be given an interest form two times per school year—once at the beginning and once at the end. By getting feedback from parents before and after the program, the IEP team can ensure that student goals are appropriately geared toward the parents' concerns and interests (Vandercook, York, & Forest, 1989). The initial interest form given at the beginning of the year helps to develop goals for the school year, while the final interest form given at the end of the school year allows the physical educator to begin thinking about goals for the next year as well as provide some ideas for activities that parents can work on with their child over the summer break.

What the student wants to learn in physical education is also an important factor to keep in mind. A simple form similar to the one for parents can be created for each student to fill out and select his or her physical education and sport interests. For students who cannot complete the form even with assistance, the GPE teacher can do sport and activity sampling. For example, the teacher might have a sport station including shooting and dribbling a basketball, shooting and dribbling a soccer ball, hitting golf balls off a mat, hitting a beach ball over a volleyball net, and hitting a softball off a tee. For physical fitness the teacher can have a stationary bike, have students walk or jog around the field or around the gym, or have students walk on a treadmill or elliptical trainer. The teacher can then observe each student as he or she moves through each station and gauge their interest, motivation, and abilities in each of the sport and fitness activities. For students with multiple disabilities who cannot do sport and activity sampling, the teacher can assist them through various activities and gauge their facial expression to see if they enjoy them. Finally, the teacher can examine what sports and recreation activities are available in the community. Physical educators generally know better than most what sport programs are available at a level that is appropriate for each student. One student might be able to play in a regular recreational soccer program, while another student might need to play in a Special Olympics or other special sports program.

With all the collected information, the teacher can determine individual goals for students. For example, Javier, who has Down syndrome, and Alex, who has Fragile X syndrome, could not understand how to fill out the interest

forms. However, the teacher noticed that they both really enjoy dribbling and shooting a basketball. The teacher also knows that basketball is popular and available in the community through Special Olympics. In fact, by speaking with the students' parents, the teacher finds out that they play Special Olympics basketball in the winter. As a result, both boys will have basketball goals as part of their IEP for physical education. Regarding fitness, Javier is very overweight and really needs to work on his physical fitness. Alex is the opposite—he is wiry and hyperactive, and he could run all day. He also is physically strong and very tall (6' 2") and athletic. As a result, Javier will have fitness goals focusing on regular cardio work (riding a stationary bike) and upper-body strength with dumbbells, while Alex will have a second sport goal of bowling.

Nora and Hannah's parents (Nora has autism, and Hannah has an intellectual disability) said their daughters do not do well in team sport settings, and they would rather see their daughters learn a lifetime leisure activity. The teacher notices that both Nora and Hannah seem to enjoy hitting golf balls off the mat, as well as trying to put balls into a makeshift hole. In addition, the teacher knows Special Olympics has a golf program in the community. As a result, both girls will have golf as their major sport goal along with a cardio goal of walking for fitness.

The final step in deciding what to teach is to evaluate each student on his or her goals. Note that the teacher does not have to give a global motor, sport, and fitness assessment to all the students, nor does he or she have to assess all the students on all the various sports activities planned (Block, 2007; Horvat, Block, & Kelly, 2007; Kelly & Melograno, 2004). Javier and Alex need to be assessed on basketball, Javier needs to be assessed on physical fitness, Nora and Hannah need to be assessed on golf, and Alex needs to be assessed on bowling. Assessment should include both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of a skill. For example, a test for dribbling a basketball should include a measure for how the student performs the skill (dribbles at waist level, uses finger pads, etc.) in addition to how well the student performs the skill (dribbles while standing still, dribbles while walking forward, dribbles while jogging forward, etc.; Horvat et al., 2007).

Organizing the Class

The most logical way to organize the individually focused, self-contained APE class is to set up stations. Stations can easily address each student's IEP goals and objectives. Figure 1 presents an example of activity stations designed to meet individually determined goals and objectives. Note that even when two students have similar goals, they may have different objectives. This further provides individualization at each station. Additional individualization can also be provided at each station by offering different size equipment (e.g., balls, targets, and striking implements), by allowing students to stand at different distances from targets, by providing different instructional cues (e.g., pictures for students who cannot

Figure 1. Sample Stations for an Individually Focused, Self-Contained APE Class

Bowling Station Goals

Tiana—focus on bringing arm back and releasing ball close to floor

Isaiah—focus on looking at target and following through toward target

Elizabeth—focus on pushing a bowling ball down a ramp using hands with assistance

Basketball Dribble Goals

Javier—focus on dribbling at waist level and not putting too much force into the dribble

Alex—focus on dribbling with finger pads and not slapping ball, dribble 3 or more times in a row

Basketball Shooting Goals

Javier—focus on supporting the ball with the nondominant hand and on pushing with the dominant hand

Alex—focus on bending knees and arms at the same time and jumping when shooting

Miniature Golf Goals

Nora—focus on holding the club with proper grip and on not using too much force when putting

Hannah—focus on not using too much force when putting, on the proper stance and alignment, and on slowing down between putts

T-ball Goals

Cory—focus on stepping with opposite foot to shift weight; follow-through; more forceful swing

read and schedules for students with autism), and by giving different levels of support (peer tutor or teacher assistant). For example, Elizabeth has severe, spastic, quadriplegic cerebral palsy (involvement in all four limbs), resulting in very little voluntary motor control. Her main goal is to learn how to control her arm movement well enough to push a bowling ball down a ramp so she can go bowling with her peers in the community. When she goes to the bowling station with her peers, her teacher assistant sets up a ramp for her. The assistant then places the ball on the ramp and helps Elizabeth in pushing the ball down the ramp. At the same time, the other two children at the bowling station (Isaiah and Tiana) work on their unique goals with a peer tutor who moves back and forth between them. Isaiah and Tiana also take turns setting up pins and retrieving the ball for Elizabeth.

While students should spend the majority of their time focusing on individually designed stations, they can also try out or “station-sample” one another’s stations to keep them from getting bored and to try out other physical activities. For example, Tiana and Isaiah, who have bowling goals, can take a turn at the basketball dribbling station, and Javier and Alex, who have basketball goals, can take turns at the bowling station. Some of the individualization described above (e.g., different equipment, different instruction and support) can be implemented during station-sampling. Even Elizabeth can go to a different station and push a basketball off her lap tray to pass it to a peer at the basketball station.

While focusing on individual goals is an appropriate model for the self-contained APE class, students may get bored focusing only on IEP objectives and on the same station for the entire school year. Also, focusing solely on IEP objectives

does not allow students to be exposed to seasonally popular sports or physical fitness activities. To overcome this problem, a modified station format can be set up to (1) address each student’s IEP goals, (2) create seasonal sport themes, and (3) include fitness themes. Some physical educators may choose to present each theme once per week (e.g., Monday is IEP day, Wednesday is Sports Day, and Friday is Fitness Day). Others may choose to alternate themes each week with fitness stations embedded within each session (weeks 1 and 3 focus on IEPs and weeks 2 and 4 focus on a sports theme). Regardless, the key is for students to work on individually determined activities at each station. For example, a cardio station might have some students walking laps, some students jogging laps, some students riding a stationary bike, and a student with multiple disabilities like Elizabeth being pushed around the gym in her wheelchair. Furthermore, the number of laps a student completes, how long a student walks or jogs, or how long and fast a student rides the stationary bike can be individualized. Figure 2 provides an example of stations for a fitness-themed day, and figure 3 provides an example of how a sport-themed station can be individualized to meet each student’s unique needs. Note that the modified station format or seasonal sport themes can also be set up to include preparation for community-based trips (e.g., bowling, putt-putt golf, watching basketball or baseball games) or participation in Special Olympics activities. For example, Special Olympics Basketball is very popular in many communities, but athletes often practice it only once a week. The self-contained physical education class can provide extra training in basketball and even mimic the competition format to help athletes be more successful in this community activity.

Figure 2. Sample Stations for Fitness Day and Sports Day

Sample Stations for "Fitness Day"

Individualization is shown only for the walking/running station.

- Walking/running
 - Tiana—walks 3 laps
 - Isaiah—jogs 1 lap, then walks 1 lap (total of 6 laps)
 - Alex—jogs 3 laps, then walks 1 lap
 - Javier—jogs the length of gym and walks width (total of 3 laps)
 - Nora—jogs 1 lap, then walks 1 lap (total of 6 laps)
 - Hannah—walks 2 laps, jogs 1 lap, then walks 1 lap
 - Elizabeth—is pushed in her wheelchair around the gym. Push only when she keeps her head up.
 - Cory—jogs 1 lap, then walks 1 lap (total of 6 laps)
- Push-ups and sit-ups
- Stationary Bike
- Dumbbells
- Therapy Ball

Sample Stations for "Team Sport Day" Focusing on Basketball

Each of these activities will have a list with each student's name and how to individualize the activity for that student.

- Dribbling a basketball
- Shooting a basketball
- Passing a basketball
- 1 vs. 1 mini-game

Summary

A self-contained special education class comprises individual students who share many things in common. All the students in the class will be approximately the same age, all the students will live in the same community, all the students will most likely have a functional rather than academic curricular focus, and many students will have similar disabilities. Yet each student will have different motor, fitness, and behavioral needs. Each student will have different physical education, sport, and leisure interests. And each student comes from a different family that may have different short- and long-term goals for their child. When faced with the challenge of organizing and conducting a self-contained APE class, special educators and physical educators must keep in mind these group similarities and individual differences. This article has presented an approach for accounting for individual differences within the self-contained APE class that conforms to best practices in APE and the IEP process. This individually focused approach will be challenging to implement and requires support from teacher assistants, peer tutors, and/or volunteers, but the reward will be students who are happier, more focused, and more motivated to improve and develop lifelong motor, sport, and leisure skills.

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Figure 3. Individualization for a Sport-Themed Station

Basketball Dribble Station (Targeted for Javier and Alex; other students can choose this station)

Components of the Basketball Dribble (posted on the wall at the station in large print):

1. Eyes look away from the ball (beginners can look at the ball)
2. Contact with fingertips
3. Pushing motion from shoulder (not slapping)
4. Ball bounces slightly to side of foot (right hand would be slightly to side of right foot)
5. Enough force with push so ball consistently bounces to waist level

Target Performance Standards for the Dribble (posted on the wall at the station in large print)

- A. Dribbles ball 5 times in a row
- B. Walks while dribbling ball
- C. Jogs while dribbling ball
- D. Jogs and dribbles ball between cones
- E. Jogs and dribbles ball between cones, stops, and shoots

Individualization for Dribbling Station (posted on wall at station in large print)

Name	Component	Performance	Cue Words
Javier	4, 5	C	not too high
Alex	2, 3	C	fingers; push don't slap
Hannah	3, 5	A	push; push harder
Tiana	3, 5	A	push; push harder
Elizabeth	Elizabeth is in a wheelchair, and her goal is to hold the ball on her lap tray and keep her head up while being pushed by a peer tutor.		
Isaiah	5	D	not so hard; easier
Nora	1, 5	A	look at the ball; push harder
Cory	5	D	slow down; focus on push

tion curriculum: An achievement-based approach. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

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