SERVING SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS IN THE SCHOOL LIBRARY MEDIA CENTER

Caren L. Wesson, Margaret J. Keefe

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Serving Special Needs Students in the School Library Media Center

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Serving Special Needs Students in the School Library Media Center

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Caren L. Wesson who served as mentor and collaborator to the authors. Her endless energy and dedication to the field of education, and in particular for students with special needs, will continue to serve as an inspiration to others. We have been privileged to have shared in her life.

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Introduction

Two primary changes in schools have magnified the importance of the relationship between the school librarian and special needs students. First, school library media specialists' roles have changed; they are not merely keepers of the library and the collection but part of the teaching staff, with an important library and information skills curriculum they are in charge of teaching and integrating with classroom curriculum. This role is especially important because of trends in education with regard to the integration of curriculum and the concept of resource-based teaching. The second change is that more and more special needs students are part of every school and every classroom, making it inevitable that the school library media specialist will teach these students, as well as the other students. The increase in this population is a result of more children being identified as special needs and the trend toward inclusion of these students in general education settings. As the hub of the school, the school library media center sets the tone for the acceptance of individual differences. (Throughout this book, *school library media specialist*, *school librarian*, and *librarian* are used synonymously.)

The American Library Association in 1988 described three roles for the school library media specialist: teacher, information specialist, and instructional consultant (or collaborator). The library media specialist as teacher refers to the role of formal and informal instructor in the development of skills, knowledge, and attitudes regarding the use of and access to information. Understanding the questions to ask, the resources to consult when answering these questions, and how to evaluate that information critically are strategies necessary for success today. In the information specialist role, the school library media specialist provides access to the information and

resources for both colleagues and students. Also, in this role, the librarian assists in identifying appropriate resources and in interpreting their content. The third role is instructional collaborator, which includes working with colleagues in curriculum development, program implementation, and integration of information skills into the classroom curriculum.

The goal of this book is to explore how these roles operate with respect to students who have special needs: mildly or moderately disabled students classified as learning disabled, emotionally disturbed or behavior disordered, mentally retarded, hearing impaired, and visually impaired students, and severely disabled students. In addition, we have used the term *special needs* so that some discussion of students who are referred to as at risk (meaning at risk for school failure and/or for needing special education services) may be included. Finally, gifted and talented students are also in need of special instruction and therefore fit in the special needs category.

The two major educational trends with a major impact on the role of the school librarian are integration and inclusion. Integration is a curricular concept meaning that all instruction should be embedded in a meaningful context and that isolated subject areas should be merged, so that students do not simply receive splinters of information but rather knowledge that creates a meaningful whole. The second trend, inclusion, refers to the return and maintenance of students with special needs in general education classrooms. In other words, special needs students need to be included with their typical peers in general classes to the extent possible, so that they will appear in the school library not as segregated groups but as individuals within a larger class. In districts where special schools have been used to place these students, these students are now likely to be returning to their neighborhood schools and assigned to a general education classroom. In these cases, substantial assistance will be required for the inclusion to be effective for everyone involved—including the special needs students, the general education students, and the teachers.

INTEGRATION

Constructivists have criticized the traditional models of instruction in which reading, language arts, social studies, science, art, music, and math are taught as separate entities. They believe that children learn better if these subject areas are taught in more meaningful ways through integrated, thematic units. Units should be topic or theme driven, and the appropriate subject areas should be integrated into the unit as opposed to having separate time periods every day for each subject. The constructivists claim that children are less interested when the information is fragmented, and the connections among topics are lost unless teachers help students understand the concepts on a much deeper level. The topics or themes need to revolve around major concepts with larger understandings that are mean-

ingful and important to students in their own lives; otherwise, the theme is merely a collection of activities and not a true integrated thematic unit (Routman, 1991). More important, students need to be able to apply these skills and information to the real world. It is the teacher's job to help make this connection to the real world for students—both special needs and general education students.

As a result of integration, teaching models now being used in schools are different from the traditional didactive structure. Thus, resource-based teaching, defined as the "use of multiple resources in a variety of media formats and technologies to achieve a curricular objective," has become important (Loertscher, 1988, p. 59). Resource-based teaching must be used with integrated, thematic units. This newer model of instruction calls for resources not usually available in the typical classroom. A multitude of materials in a variety of formats for teacher and student use is required; thus, resource-based instruction depends more than ever on the school library media specialist and the school library media center. Integrated instruction means more of a collaborative role for the school library media specialist as he or she assists teachers and students in identifying appropriate resources.

Another aspect of integration refers to the integration or collaboration of the library skills curriculum with that of the classroom curriculum. Students have often been heard to say that library or information skills class is boring. This topic is not exciting for students or teachers until the connection between the skill and its application is also taught.

One fourth-grade classroom teacher and the school library media specialist collaborated on a unit on dinosaurs. Before students began to research, they were taught a lesson that covered identifying information on a catalog card, reviewed call numbers, and brainstormed possible subject headings to look up related to the topic. They were then asked to locate dinosaur books themselves, thus putting the library skill immediately to a practical use. The next day, a notetaking lesson was team taught by both teachers, and students were asked to begin taking notes using the books they had retrieved from the library the previous day. As a culminating activity, students were asked to word process their reports and thus integrated computer technology learned in the library media center. After this lesson, when students were asked to apply the library information skill to an assignment, one student was quoted as saying, "Library skills are real now." This example shows a few ways the school library media specialist can affect the integrated thematic approach to teaching.

Students cannot possibly acquire all the information or content that is available to them, so the application of information skills is paramount. Students may not be able to retain all of life's information, but they should be able to retrieve, evaluate, assimilate, and utilize it when needed, especially for real-life application. Throughout this book, the movement toward

more integrated instruction will be highlighted. Integrated instruction exemplifies the collaborative role for the school library media specialist highlighted in Part III.

INCLUSION

In 1986, Madeline Will, assistant secretary of education in charge of special education at the federal level, wrote an article "Educating Children with Learning Problems: A Shared Responsibility," in which she called for major change, igniting a movement that has been sweeping the country ever since. She and many other special and general educators had begun to question the efficacy of pull-out and self-contained special education classes. Part of their concern stemmed from studies examining the efficacy issue of special education. Special education students left in general education settings had as much academic gain, self-esteem, and social skill growth as the special education students who had been isolated in pull-out and special self-contained classes. Some evidence seemed to suggest that social skills and self-concepts were higher when special education students remained in general education classes. Another concern was that special needs students were not learning how to survive in a real-world setting because they were isolated in a setting with only other students like them and no broad continuum of abilities and personalities. Yet another disadvantage was that students in general education did not have the opportunity to learn about and from their special needs peers. Looking forward to the time these students would join society, the question was how educators might expect disabled and nondisabled adults to get along and understand each other when they had not been given the experiences in school to learn how to communicate and accept differences.

The idea of mainstreaming had been proposed in the early 1970s, but this model was beginning to crack under all its flaws. Mainstreaming meant that special education students were assigned to a special class, such as a self-contained learning disabilities class or a resource room, and then spent a portion of their day in the general education mainstream program. Three major flaws were inherent in this mainstreaming model. First, no one teacher was responsible for the mainstreamed students, and thus, often their time in the mainstream was not well spent. Second, some educators saw a major rift between special and general education and considered that within the public schools there were two separate systems: general and special. There were major problems with communication as basic as two teachers teaching one student math and not coordinating instruction. Ownership and responsibility for individual students was left hanging. No one seemed to take full responsibility. The general education teacher looked at the student as an extra burden instead of part of his or her caseload. The special education student was generally not included on the general edu-

cation teacher's class list. Third, the stigma from being labeled and sometimes separated from peers caused problems for many students.

The system of referral, identification, and placement of special education students appears to many to be ludicrous. Many times the teacher makes the referral for special education testing; the teacher believes that the general education setting is not the best placement for this student to maximize his or her potential, and is having trouble reaching and teaching the student, who appears to have a disabling condition. The assessment procedure involves up to a dozen people. The general education teacher participates actively in assessment as well by allowing many visitors to observe in the classroom and permitting interruptions when the referred student leaves the room for assessment purposes. Following assessment, a meeting is held among the professionals, and parents are invited and encouraged to attend as well. Many times the student may not fit the definition of disabled given the criteria set by the district and state board of education. The child may be identified as a special education student, but the primary placement may still remain in the general education classroom. When a resource room or self-contained classroom placement is the program of choice by this committee, the general education teacher may still have this student in his or her classroom for the mainstreamed portion of the day. For example, the student may attend special education for only one hour of language arts instruction. The amount of time in a resource setting, which is the most frequently used placement option, varies from thirty minutes three times weekly to half a day, five days per week. Thus, after asking for assistance with this difficult-to-teach student and then proceeding through the referral and assessment process, the student often ends up remaining in this teacher's classroom for at least a portion of the day. After all this effort to help the student, this teacher is probably frustrated because little has really changed as a result of this effort.

Pull-out programs, such as resource rooms, have a host of their own problems. First and foremost is the difficulty of coordinating instruction for students in the pull-out instruction setting and in the general classroom. (This dilemma arises not only for special education resource room students but also for pull-out gifted students.) Usually a resource teacher works with fifteen to twenty students who are in classrooms with six to twelve teachers across the grade spectrum in the school. It is nearly impossible to communicate regularly about so many students with so many teachers. As a result, instruction becomes fragmented. Children may have to leave in the midst of a lesson in the general education class to go to the resource room for instruction (Pugach & Wesson, in press). They spend ten minutes packing up and walking to the resource room. When they get there, that teacher is in the middle of another lesson with a different group of students, so the arriving students wait for directions. When finished with the resource room time, they pack up materials and walk down the hallway, only to find the

general education class knee-deep in a different lesson, and so the traveling students have no idea of how to catch up. For many children, pull-out programs can be counterproductive; their actual time receiving teacher-led instruction decreases due to the time required for transition, and the teachers' lessons often have no relationship to each other. Sometimes the two teachers confuse children with different explanations of the same concept. This fragmentation and lack of cohesiveness is challenging for any child but is especially problematic for a child with special needs.

The final major problem with the dual system of education—special and general—is the stigma caused by being identified as different and needing to go to specialists to be taught. They view themselves and are seen by others as being different from everyone else—and somehow not as good. They are often ridiculed and called names. They may not develop friendships with their classmates because they do not spend enough time with them to be known for their personalities and strengths. Teachers may inadvertently model a lack of understanding and frustration with the special needs students, and the other students will learn to turn away from them as well.

This dual system and resulting problems do not have to exist. There are other ways to organize schools and serve all children. One of the goals of this book is to promote a better relationship between general and special education and inclusion of special needs students in general education settings, especially the school library media center.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The roles of the school library media specialist as teacher, information specialist, and instructional collaborator in relation to students who have special needs provide the structure for the parts of this book. Part I, on the school library media specialist as teacher, highlights the teaching role as the specialist works directly with special needs students. How and what to teach are the main points of this part.

Part II focuses on the school library media specialist's role as an information specialist. It examines how the specialist can take into account the presence of special needs students when designing the library and selecting materials. The role of technology is addressed, as is the literary technique of bibliotherapy.

Part III highlights the school library media specialist's role as collaborator as he or she works with special needs students. As schools restructure in the future, the largest portion of this specialist's role will be in collaborating with other teachers. This is the way of the future in education, and there is no one more essential to this effort than the school library media specialist. This part provides guidance on the different aspects of this role as they relate to special needs students.

This book is meant to be used as a resource for school library media specialists who seek guidance with special needs students. Yet although it can assist in problem solving, it cannot replace the face-to-face communication so necessary for effective schools.

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The School Library Media Specialist's Role as Teacher

I

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Teaching Library and Information Skills to Special Needs Students

1

Caren L. Wesson and Margaret J. Keefe

The role of school librarian has evolved from library clerk and keeper of the collection into a multifaceted school library media specialist who is viewed as an integral part of the educational process in the school, directly involved in teaching and curriculum development as well as in the organization and operation of the school library media center. As information and technology become more important, students need to learn how to access information and analyze data. Research skills and resource-based learning become a central focus of education. As resource-based learning becomes the norm, the teaching role of the librarian will grow even more. As the role of school library media specialist becomes more teaching oriented, it becomes imperative that school library media specialists become aware of the implications of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) passed in 1990. This law, as well as the law that preceded it (PL 94–142, The Education for all Handicapped Children Act), mandates that students with special needs be instructed in the least restrictive environment. This chapter describes special needs students and the programs that serve them, states the rationale for including these students in library activity with their typical peers, and describes a model for instruction.

WHO ARE STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS?

Special needs students fall into four categories: high and low-incidence disabilities, categories that refer to the prevalence of the disability; at-risk students, or those who have not been formally identified as special education students but nonetheless need extra support to be successful in a general education setting; and gifted and talented students, who demon-

strate superior abilities in one or more of the following domains: cognitive, affective, physical, intuitive, and societal (Clark, 1992). Students in these categories may require some individualization in the school library. (For specific information on definitions, see particular states' special education laws, their district manuals, and general special education texts. Also see Heward & Orlansky, 1992, and Meyen, 1990).

High Incidence

High-incidence disabilities refers to students who are officially identified through an assessment process as learning disabled (LD), emotionally disturbed (ED) (or behavior disordered [BD]), or mentally retarded (MR). Different states may use alternative labels; for example, in Wisconsin, the term *cognitive disabilities* is used instead of *mentally retarded.*

A learning disabled child often has difficulty with acquiring, storing, and retrieving information, although the child has normal intelligence and fully functioning visual and auditory senses. State departments of education set criteria for determining whether a child is learning disabled, such as a discrepancy between ability and achievement, which can be determined through comparing scores on intelligence tests with those on achievement tests. Other state definitions may include the presence of an underlying processing problem; that is, the senses are functioning normally, but the processing of the information for receptive and expressive purposes is inadequate. The bottom line is that children identified as LD are not learning at the rate of improvement expected given their normal or above-normal intelligence.

Students who are identified as emotionally disturbed may have several problem behaviors, including demonstrating unusual behaviors in normal circumstances, a pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression, or chronic misbehavior, including aggressiveness and inappropriate verbalizations. Again, each state has specific criteria used to determine if a particular student is emotionally disturbed or behavior disordered (the terms vary state to state). For example, evidence of problems in two or more environments, such as home, school, and community, may be required, evidence that the behaviors are frequent, severe, or chronic may be necessary, or both.

Three facets are considered when the label mentally retarded is used: low IQ (below 70), low adaptive behavior performance, and problems identified prior to age nineteen. Adaptive behaviors are those used in normal daily life such as communication, self-care (bathing, feeding self), social skills, and use of transportation.

Low Incidence

Low-incidence special education students include children with autism, visual, and/or auditory impairments, severe and/or multiple disabilities, traumatic brain injury, and physical and other health impairments—an extremely heterogeneous group. As school library media specialists become acquainted with children in this group, specific strategies for individual students need to be shared with the librarian. Advice from their teachers and supervisors from these various special education programs is essential.

As with the high-incidence categories, students with low-incidence special needs are identified by determining whether they meet specific criteria set forth by the state department of public instruction. For example, to determine if a child is hearing impaired, an audiogram is conducted, and specific parameters for the extent of hearing loss in terms of decibels and frequencies are used to judge eligibility for special education services. Many children in this low-incidence group require adaptation of equipment and modification of instruction in order to learn. Physically disabled children may use augmentative communication tools, such as computers, language boards, and eye contact sensors in order to express themselves. Visually-impaired children require special materials, such as large-print or braille books. Most children who are visually impaired have low vision ability, but some vision; only a small percentage are totally blind. Similarly, children with hearing impairment are seldom completely deaf; rather, they have some residual hearing ability, which needs to be recognized and used.

Children who have autistic behaviors also need library privileges, though it may be difficult to discern the benefit of their activity in the library. Children with autism have very poor communication and interpersonal skills. They seem to be unresponsive to the language directed to them and seldom initiate or maintain conversations. Another group that has difficulty communicating for other reasons are students with severe or multiple disabilities. Usually children in this group have low intelligence (IQs below 40) and other physical or sensory problems, such as cerebral palsy or visual problems. These children also need multiple settings in which to learn, and among these potential sites is the school library media center. They may be learning to sit quietly while a book is being read or to make an X on the line of the checkout card, but the benefit of including them or children with autism is that they feel part of the school and their classroom community.

At Risk

Some students who have not been formally identified as needing special education nevertheless are difficult to teach in general education. Many general education students fall into this category of at-risk or gray-area students. They do not meet criteria for special education, so do not qualify

and cannot receive those services. Yet their school performance is poor, as reflected in poor grades, low standardized test scores, and negative teacher perceptions, and they have poor self-concepts. Many of these students are disenfranchised from education and have little motivation to put forth academic effort. The library may be the key location for fostering interest in learning and school.

Gifted and Talented

In contrast to the other groups are gifted and talented students. If left in a traditional classroom environment where large-group, teacher-directed instruction is the mainstay, these students may soon lose interest and motivation. Some schools do not formally identify these gifted students until fourth grade and at that time special pull-out programs may begin. Other schools pair teachers and a coordinator to help bolster the curricular needs of these students.

When working with gifted students, school librarians should be aware of their varying characteristics. In the past, gifted students were identified solely on the basis of an IQ score of 140 or above. More recent definitions have broadened that perspective based on more varied criteria. Renzulli (1978) looks at above-average general abilities, a high level of task commitment, and high levels of creativity as the ingredients of giftedness. In his model, students with all three characteristics are considered gifted. There is no federal definition of giftedness, nor is there any federal mandate for gifted programs. Many states have definitions but loose requirements for programmatic implementation. Critics argue that shortsightedness with regard to serving gifted and talented students is a national tragedy with long-term political, economic, and social ramifications (Davis & Rimm, 1985). Clearly, the school library is a key environment for improving the education of gifted and talented students as this is the locale of the materials and resources they need to access as they learn independent research skills.

HOW ARE SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS SERVED?

There are many programmatic structures for serving students with special needs, and often discussion about these structures focuses on a continuum of services, from the general education classroom to more segregated settings to settings that are completely isolated from typical students.

General Education

The vast majority of students with special needs are schooled in general education classroom settings with their peers. Thus, the school librarian

will likely teach these students as part of a large general education class, with the contact person being the general education classroom teacher. Students identified as MR, LD, or ED, and students requiring supplemental reading and math services provided by federally funded Chapter 1 funds, counseling, physical and occupational therapy, and other support services typically spend almost all their school hours in the general education setting. A growing trend is to keep them in the general education setting to the maximum extent possible. In fact, the IDEA and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act mandate placement for identified special education students in the least restrictive setting. The majority of leaders in the fields of special education and remedial reading agree that for all students to have the benefit of peer modeling and socialization in a typical setting, the general classroom setting is the best placement as long as support services are provided (Allington & Johnson, 1989).

Several different means of support of special needs students placed in general education settings are being employed. In the team teaching model, the general education teacher works in partnership with either a special education teacher or a Chapter 1 teacher in order to meet the needs of all the students in the class, both typical learners and special needs learners. Team teaching may be an all-day, every-day model or a part-time situation (e.g., one hour per day). Much discussion and negotiation go into these teams before they are undertaken. Roles and responsibilities need to be delineated, as do expectations for student academic and social behaviors. During the planning process for teaming, the teachers may decide to split the instructional responsibilities evenly, to share given their different areas of expertise, or to have one person be lead teacher while the other provides support via monitoring and guiding individual students (Pugach & Wesson, in press). Often one teacher has curricular responsibility, while the other is child centered in perspective. These two perspectives may stay permanently with a given member of the team or may be alternated between team members. With large teams, the roles may be shared. The primary goal is that all the needs of all the students are met. In addition to special education teachers' teaming with general education teachers, sometimes the Chapter 1 teacher is the partner. The traditional pull-out model has given way to pull-aside practices within the classroom itself. There are two advantages to the pull-aside model: there is less stigma associated with having the student leave the class, and the teachers (Chapter 1 and regular education) who are both instructing the student in reading or math may coordinate their lessons so that redundancy and gaps do not exist in the curriculum. With two teachers present, pull-aside may evolve into team teaching, which could benefit all children in the classroom, as well as the targeted Chapter 1 students.

A second model for serving all students in a general education setting is the use of a consulting teacher. The consulting teacher usually does not

work directly with the students but may observe the students, prepare materials for them, and assist in preparing lesson plans to accommodate individual needs. Consultants meet with the teacher regularly and bring a knowledge of specific learning and behavior characteristics of the student and alternative teaching strategies to these sessions. The consultant lets the teacher take the lead in deciding how to instruct the student but provides support and advice.

The third model, a teacher assistance team, is similar to the consultant model with the exception that a group of colleagues meet to discuss the challenges of the difficult-to-teach students. These meetings tend to occur less frequently than consulting teacher meetings, but the advice may be more readily accepted by the teacher because it comes from a group of peers rather than from an expert. The team may be a group of teachers who meet on every case throughout the year or a specific group identified by the teacher solely for the specific case. The latter model is preferable and more accommodating to including the school librarian. This model primarily serves the at-risk group.

Resource Room—Partial Pull-Out

Students with special needs may go to separate classes for a portion of the day; these are often referred to as resource rooms and are taught by a special education teacher. Chapter 1 pull-out classes are actually quite similar in structure. Students usually attend the resource room for a half-hour to three hours per day. There may be one to fifteen students in the room at any time. In this setting, there are usually fewer distractions and smaller instructional groups and therefore more individualized attention. The problems with this model are the isolation and associated stigma, lack of appropriate peer models, and the difficulty of coordinating instruction between the general education teacher and the resource teacher.

Self-Contained Special Education Class

A separate class, the self-contained classroom, is taught by a special education teacher. The students spend the majority of their time in this segregated setting but may participate in general classes at their age-appropriate level for music, gym, and library. Within this structure, there is no problem with coordinating basic skill and content instruction, but the students have little contact with their typical peers and no models for academic and social skills development. Another dilemma is that often content areas such as social studies and science are seldom addressed in special classes, which makes it difficult for students who could be integrated into these content-area classes in later years because they have acquired little background knowledge.

Special Schools

Residential and special day schools are the last level of the special education continuum. Occasionally there is home tutoring if illness or school phobia is substantially problematic. Special schools are becoming increasingly rare but still exist for students who are hearing impaired, visually impaired, or emotionally disturbed. A special education–trained core of teachers and teacher assistants staff the schools. Specialized instruction, including adaptive physical education, physical and occupational therapy, art and music therapy, and other specializations are often offered in such settings. The drawbacks are the isolation, lack of appropriate models, and the teachers' loss of perception of normalcy. Parents are less and less enamored with these isolated schools because the long-term likelihood of the students' fitting into society as adults is decreased.

WHY INCLUDE SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS IN LIBRARY ACTIVITIES?

The library is an important setting for special needs students because of the range of skills that may be addressed given the technology, resources available, and potential skills that may be taught there. The specific skills each special needs student needs to be taught in this setting are documented in the individualized education plans (IEPs), part of the mandate found in the IDEA. The IEP lists the student's level of performance, goals, objectives, and proposed interventions to be used in an effort to help the student reach his or her potential in all areas in which special education instruction is needed. School library media specialists should play an important role in the implementation of these laws and in the movement to include special needs students. Libraries, both public and school, are excellent examples of places where integration can be readily facilitated. Inclusion means more than providing access to facilities. Physical presence in the library, especially the school library media center, is not enough. In order to include special needs students in a meaningful way, many aspects of their activity in the library should be considered; instructional strategies to help them learn skills associated with the library, selection of materials appropriate for all students, and helping students interact with each other in a positive manner.

The school library media specialist and the special education teacher can work together to teach library skills to mildly and moderately didsabled students. A team approach with joint planning by both the school library media specialist and special education teacher is important for several reasons. First, both individuals have unique information: the school library media specialist knows the library skills sequence and the teaching techniques used with general education students, and the special education